



Can the marquess find his magic in time  
to save a duke and captivate a countess?

# CAPTIVATING THE COUNTESS

THE SCHOOL OF MAGIC SERIES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# PATRICIA RICE

# Captivating the Countess

School of Magic, Book 6

Patricia Rice



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*Yorkshire, Castle Yates*

“MARRY THE GIRL before I die, Rainford!”

Rainford—otherwise known as Jasper Winchester, marquess and heir to a dukedom—considered crushing his teacup. Rain was known as a man of icy civility and professionalism. He would not strangle his father. “I will, as soon as Rutledge returns from India so I may properly ask for his daughter’s hand and arrange the settlements.”

His father, the Duke of Sommersville, sat up against his bed pillows and scowled. Inherently tall and lean, the duke was gaunt now. His blond hair had turned to silver and had started to thin with his illness—an illness Rainford was unable to cure, much to everyone’s distress. “Dammit, Rain, that cold, calculating brain of yours can’t *buy* a wife! Romance Miss Rutledge, tell her she’s special, woo the woman, and she won’t want to delay!”

Rain stoically waited for his father to fling the Ice King epithet at him, as everyone else did. He accepted the sobriquet. Someone in this household had to be the sensible one, and as heir, responsibility fell on him. “Araminta is shy. She has requested that we wait for her father. I don’t wish to terrify her.”

He didn’t want to romance the child either. He’d hoped she’d show a little more interest if she stayed at the castle in rural splendor. She hadn’t.

“You can marry any damned female in the kingdom!” his father muttered. He was too ill to roar these days. “Why did you choose one who won’t marry you now? I won’t last forever.”

Because Rain had thought he'd have decades more before inheriting the burden of the family estates and eccentrics. The estates, he could manage. The eccentrics. . . were beyond his control. His molars had ground to nubbins these last months of dealing with the well-intentioned family gathering to pay their respects to the dying duke.

He'd had to hire a footman just to shut doors on the escape-artist monkeys one of the aunts had left in her last visit. The parrot. . . wasn't any worse than the musicians Alicia hired. Left to their own devices, his family would turn the castle into a jungle with banana trees, native drummers, and a lion. He'd forbidden the lion.

"No one lasts forever, including *me* if I don't get some rest," Rain retorted. As trained physicians, he and his father knew their limits. He thought if he sat down now, he'd fall asleep while his father was in mid rant. "I should go to London and leave you with this madhouse. At least I might be able to complete some portion of my work."

"It's December." Disliking helplessness, the duke picked fretfully on anyone in his vicinity. "There's no one in London."

Well, that was the point. In London, he could work without querulous fathers, bored sisters, visiting aunts and cousins, a nursery full of screaming brats, and a cousin who had brought London home with him for the holidays. Rain had a medical treatise to complete and an entire book of legislation he should be reading through.

If all of that went away, he might even have time to look into creating a medical clinic of his own. But since that wasn't happening, Rain longed for the quiet of his club where no women could demand his time and attention.

Which was how he'd landed in this unmarried state, he recognized.

"You promised your sisters and their families a proper country holiday." The duke continued his complaint. "You can't run away

and leave them for London. Your duty is to marry and produce an heir. Work can wait. Do you even know what your intended is doing right now? Why aren't you busy seducing her?"

Rain respected his father. The duke had a reason for his desperation. But Rain had been raised as a gentleman. Only a rogue would impregnate his intended wife before marriage. And since the female in question refused to marry without her father's permission, he either waited or found someone else. His family had spent the entire thirty-four years of his life looking for his bride. He didn't have time to start anew.

Or the patience to repeat the argument. "I believe Miss Rutledge is avoiding my sisters' séance and Teddy Junior's bacchanalia by praying in the chapel. Or perhaps hiding in the library. She knows these are the hours I reserve for patients—although at this point, you may be my last one. Most patients can't wait until visiting hours twice a week to break limbs or become ill."

Just being aristocrats practicing medicine established the family as eccentric, but it was family tradition. Descendant of druidic Malcolms, the duke was a brilliant healer.

"Going to that herbalist in the village, are they? Shame. Even if you have no gift for healing, you're still a trained physician."

The half-hearted grumble pierced Rain's heart and twisted like a knife. The one duty he *had* to accomplish, the one he desired to succeed at more than any other, he'd failed at. He couldn't heal the duke, with training or with any mystical *gifts*.

Unable to answer the unanswerable, he walked out.

A flute and a fiddle echoed from his cousin Teddy's studio on the floor above, on the far end of the enormous, sprawling mansion. Like many ancient edifices, this one was called a castle, but it hadn't resembled one in centuries. Winchesters had an affinity for architecture. Once the dukes and their families had added every conceivable eccentricity to the main Sommersville estate in Somerset, they'd started on Castle Yates in Yorkshire.



Teddy, being one of the more artistic Winchesters, was intent on stamping his architectural fantasy on the castle's stately Georgian exterior. He had drawn up a neo-Gothic monstrosity with turrets, battlements, and even a portcullis, if he could manage a moat. If Teddy inherited the family fortune, the conversion would drain the family coffers, as one of their ancestors once had done in Sommersville.

And that was just *one* reason Rainford had to marry and produce an heir—soon.

In the family parlor below, his sisters and their guests screamed in horror. Rain didn't even bother to investigate. He wasn't about to be dragged into their search for apparitions from beyond the veil. His sisters were bored and looking for entertainment, he understood. The husbands of the three married ones were out hunting, leaving the women to their own devices. All four of them depended on the income from the vast Winchester fortune.

The fortune that insane Teddy would inherit if Rain was unmarried when the duke died.

### *Christmas, 1871, Edinburgh, School of Malcolms*

"OH, isn't she precious! Look at her beautiful pink fingers." Teacher and half owner of the School of Malcolms Lady Agatha bounced the infant in her chubby arms. "Look, Isobel, tell me you don't want one of these."

To Isobel's alarm, her hostess shoved the infant at her.

Her twin rushed to the rescue, sweeping the sleeping child into her own arms and cradling her. "Sit down," Iona hissed under her breath. Then she addressed the new mother while smiling and rocking the bundle of joy. "Olivia, you are truly blessed. Look how well she sleeps!"

Isobel had so wanted to have a peek at the baby. . . She sighed

and obediently settled on the nearest chair like an invalid, knowing the messiness and embarrassment of keeling over at the slightest startlement would mar this holiday gathering. Worse yet would be breaking anything she held when she fell, like a vulnerable infant. Of necessity, Bell had learned since childhood to sit still and allow others to regulate how much of life came to her. In disgruntlement, she waited for her twin to hand over their friend's bundle of joy.

Fortunately, Iona understood and placed the infant in her arms. Finally, Bell could cuddle the babe. Given her curse, she would never have one of her own, but that didn't stop her from enjoying others.

"You're a natural," Lady Phoebe cried. Tall, with a headful of chestnut hair, she nurtured animals instead of children. "You should stay with Olivia instead of returning to your drafty estate."

Only recently granted the title and estate of the Countess of Craigmore, Bell laughed at the notion. She would keel over the instant she encountered Olivia's large, boisterous family.

"You could stay here, dear," Lady Agatha suggested.

*Here* was the newly renovated School of Malcolms. The original two medieval townhomes had been connected to a third building, allowing them to expand schoolrooms and the parlor they used for entertaining. Tonight's grand opening holiday celebration was spilling over with former students, teachers, and family. Bell had taught here briefly, before taking her position as a steward with the Malcolm Librarian. She'd enjoyed the company, but the continuous riotous noise had left her prostrate much of the time.

"Thank you, but I think I really should return to Craigmore. It's my responsibility, after all." She might be a countess in her own right, but she possessed naught more than an ancient manor house near Inverness, barren land, and sheep. Still, she knew how to manage money. She'd figure out how to save her tenants from poverty. Somehow.

The infant started to squirm, and Bell held it out to Olivia. "You will have your hands full when she is older. It's always interesting

to guess what gifts they might have.”

“I’ll just hope she’s not her father’s daughter and want to dig mines,” Olivia said with a laugh.

The recently refurbished parlor smelled of the huge evergreen the students had decorated. Candles twinkled in all the windows, and a generous fire blazed in the fireplace. Forced to sit straight by the corset required for her unaccustomed fancy gown, Bell sat primly in a lovely new wing chair and soaked up the camaraderie as best as she could while everyone milled and towered over her. She dreaded the moment the men returned with their loud voices and masculine rowdiness. But for now, the parlor was a jumble of colorful femininity as the women caught up on all their news.

In her glittering red sari, Lady Dare, another of the school’s teachers, claimed the infant next, cooing to her in two languages. “Lydia, quit looking at the bookshelf and come admire this little beauty. How in the name of heaven will you tend your own bundle of joy if you have your head in a book?”

Heavily pregnant, Lydia, the Malcolm Librarian and Bell’s former employer, set down the book she’d been perusing and accepted the babe. “She looks as if she’ll write her own story someday. So much has happened in these last years, it’s hard to imagine what the future will hold for our children.”

“If my husband has anything to say about it, we’ll all be bouncing around in horseless carriages and have telegraphs in our homes.” Unencumbered by the usual feminine frippery, Lady Phoebe dropped into an unladylike sprawl in a chair near Isobel’s. “You should stay here in Edinburgh, Bell. There are so many exciting things happening.”

Bell’s twin rapped Phoebe on the head with Lydia’s book. “*Think*, my friend. You just put *Bell* and *exciting* in the same sentence. Are you trying to kill her?”

Bell laughed. “I’m not likely to die from overexcitement. But I would prefer to limit how often I topple from being caught by surprise. Craigmores is peaceful and familiar.”

“We’ll miss you dreadfully,” Lydia said, making a face at the babe to hide her distress.

Bell loved the generous librarian, but she also knew when it was time to take destiny in her own hands. “You do not need two stewards, and I am not capable of dealing with the farmers you require to rent your land. Your new estate agent is excellent and well-trained. I could—”

Lady Gertrude, the other co-owner of the School of Malcolms, opened the door and gestured for a parade of servants bearing refreshments to enter. “Agatha, why have you not told the child about Yatesville?”

The plumper, shorter of the sisters nodded vigorously. “Oh yes, I forgot. It seems the duke will be in need of a house steward in his Yorkshire estate. I know you’re a countess now, Bell, but. . . well. . . the duke is in ill health. He’s a Malcolm, you know, and he’s been good to us. They could really use someone quiet and efficient who might slip into the role without much ado. It’s a much bigger estate than Lydia’s, of course. But that means you needn’t worry about tenants, just the house servants. I’m sure a duke has multiple estate agents for handling his fields.”

“Castle Yates?” Isobel asked warily. “The duke of Sommersville’s estate?” As far as she was aware, the duke was elderly, but she’d met his son—

The parlor door blew open, bringing in a gale of cold winter air and a mass of masculinity in boots and overcoats, all smacking each other on the back and talking at once.

Startled, Bell felt her chest constrict. She struggled against it, gasping for breath. But the spirit was there waiting, pushing into her head.

As Bell lost consciousness, she heard a plaintive voice cry, *Save my son, please. Save the duke.*

## Two

*January, 1872, Castle Yates*

IN THE MUSIC ROOM, a poorly trained pianist—mostly likely Rain's youngest sister Alicia—pounded out a rollicking version of "Good King Wenceslaus." A clamor of voices joined in, although he wasn't convinced they sang the actual words of the carol. It was, after all, January. The Feast of Stephen had been over a week ago.

In Teddy's studio above, the screaming diva had yet to leave despite all her threats. The two-story marble entrance hall provided a sound chamber that intensified her dramatic fury. In his study, Rain winced at the echoes. Perhaps he should have the steps carpeted. And the ceilings.

Distracted by the cacophony, he returned to the columns in the bookkeeping ledger his Cousin John had left on the desk. He'd lost track of the numbers. In frustration, Rain shed his coat and picked up his new barbells. He preferred the calming mindlessness of exercise to banging his head against the desk.

A servant scratched at the door. Rain ignored him. It would just be another summons from his father. Everyone else in the household knew to leave him alone.

Overhead, a door slammed. Rain did ten arm lifts and began swinging the weights in circles. Good solid oak doors shouldn't slam in nonexistent drafts, especially if the footman was doing his job and keeping them shut. One of Teddy's women must finally be leaving. She had a mighty heft if she could slam one of those—

A second and third door slammed. What the. . . ?

His study door opened, and Franklin, his normally

imperturbable butler, stuck in his balding head. “The duke, sir, he’s taken a spell and needs you.”

“Tell him about the boy who called wolf, will you? I’ve toted the figures in that book three times now and have come up with three different answers. I’ll never finish if I have to keep running upstairs.”

Another door slammed.

The butler looked distraught. “He thinks the ghosts have returned.”

*Ghosts.* Lowering the weights, Rain shook his head to see if it might rattle. “Where is Miss Rutledge? Couldn’t she see what he wants?”

His intended bride spent a great deal of time anywhere else except helping him. To be fair, she was young, and his older, married sisters held sway over the household. She couldn’t very well be expected to take over the role of marchioness until they married. But a little help with his family wouldn’t be amiss.

“I believe she was taking baskets to the Widow Walter and her children. She left early this morning. Her mother is a trifle worried, so I’ve sent a groom to see if she needs assistance.”

“Well, at least she’s being useful. The widow could talk the ear off an elephant.” Putting down the weights, Rain shrugged into his coat again.

Another door crashed above. His aunt’s infernal parrot screeched holy hell in retaliation. That meant the monkeys would be shrieking shortly and flinging whatever objects were left unbroken in the room they currently inhabited.

If he had a temper to lose, he’d be insane by now. Instead, his defense against chaos was to retreat behind an icy barrier. “Will you shoot whoever is slamming those doors? I’ll fetch Alicia and send her to the duke.” That should kill two birds with one stone. The piano racket was louder now that his study door was open.

The duke didn’t want to see his daughters. He wanted to berate Rain. But enough was enough.

Not bothering to button his coat or straighten his cravat, he started down the lengthy corridor to the music room. A footman ran after him from the front of the house.

“My lord, visitors.” He held out a salver bearing cards. “They say they have come about the steward’s position?”

Rain considered himself a confident man of rational authority, but he briefly wondered what would happen if he bellowed like a wounded beast. The roof would fall in, no doubt. “We have no steward’s position to be filled.”

He would have added that applicants should go to the rear door and see his estate agent, but after a glance at the card, he held his tongue. One didn’t send countesses to a rear door. Countesses did not apply for non-existent steward’s positions.

Had the entire world gone mad?

The doors abruptly stopped slamming. The carol crashed to a halt. Teddy’s inamorata quit screaming. The parrot calmed down. Blessed silence descended. Rain absorbed the abrupt peace with incredulity.

He’d met Lady Craigmore at a wedding. She was a Malcolm, he knew, possessed of unknown witchy gifts and quiet, mousy demeanor. Had she just cast a spell on the entire household? Rain hoped so. He’d hire her on the spot as circus master.

Yanking his cravat back in place, he followed the footman to the formal drawing room. A large, older woman in ancient bombazine and an old-fashioned bonnet blocked his view of the other chair by the fire. Bonnet-woman wasn’t the countess.

Buttoning his coat and maintaining the cool demeanor with which he managed a vast array of estates and people, Rain entered the parlor.

Ah, there was the odd little wren he remembered from her sister’s wedding to one of Rain’s best friends. The newly-styled countess wore a fashionable traveling outfit in a forest green that left her looking more pale than he recalled. Anemic, probably, following one of those foolish food fads ladies sometimes indulged

in.

“Ladies, to what do I owe the honor?”

The wren jumped. That’s what he remembered about her—her tendency to startle and swoon without cause.

The countess blinked long lashes and gazed at him as if he were a ghost, then smoothly recovered to introduce her companion. “Lord Rainford, you remember Mrs. Winifred Malcolm? The two of you met in Edinburgh last autumn?”

“Of course, my lady.” He took the older woman’s hand. “You were instrumental in saving your nephew and his friends after their little escapade with villains.”

The lady’s healing powers, while not great, had been superior to his. He’d simply used scientific medical practices, which couldn’t always mend as well as one liked.

Mrs. Malcolm complacently crossed her gloved hands in her ample lap. “We are all grateful that you were there to sew up the young fools. Which is why I was eager to accompany my nephew’s sister-in-law here. Young people these days think they can fly about like magpies, but it would do no one good if the countess came to harm on her way to help you.”

“To help *me*?” Rainford suffered a frisson of alarm.

Her nephew was the Earl of Ives, Rain’s good friend as well as distant family. Ives had married the countess’s twin, a Malcolm beekeeper.

Having seen a fair share of the weird Malcolm heritage, Rain assumed the countess had mystical *gifts* of some sort, but of a certainty, she’d be another eccentric. Still, the quiet Lady Craigmores didn’t appear the sort to foist herself on him for no reason—which rang alarms.

“Winifred is on her way to Norfolk and Dare’s sanitarium to visit her ill son,” Lady Craigmores explained. “I’m most grateful for her accompaniment. But if the ladies are incorrect and you are no longer in need of a steward, I assure you that I am quite capable —”



Three doors slammed in quick succession. The diva's fury erupted through the ceiling again. The parrot emitted an unholy cackle.

Startled, the wren toppled.

"DON'T LET her stay unconscious. Help her breathe." Winifred's familiar voice rattled above Bell.

Unfamiliar male hands efficiently worked at her bodice fastenings. She was face down in a field of hideous purple velvet.

Gasping, Bell drew in a deep breath and struggled to right herself.

"The lady, upstairs," she choked out, endeavoring to remove improper hands from her person. "She is most distraught. Please send someone to her."

"It is you who is face down in the sofa," a male voice informed her with a hint of cynicism. "The lady upstairs is a histrionic opera singer and has been distraught for weeks." But he blessedly stepped away so she could right herself.

Bell had enough experience to smother her embarrassment and focus on the immediate problem. Upright, she steadied herself with a hand on the cushion.

The marquess, in all his icy, platinum-blond splendor, masculine size, and arrogance, studied her with smoldering gray eyes she remembered too well. Well, there went any hope of obtaining the position.

She probably didn't want a position in this turbulent household. The caterwauling alone was likely to render her senseless on an hourly basis. She threw a wary glance at the caged parrot and noted a pair of monkeys perched in the draperies above it. How could a man so devoid of emotion live in a zoo like this?

As long as the castle wasn't haunted by capricious spirits, her spells were generally brief. She had practice in controlling them.

Taking another breath, she stood. She preferred a quiet, orderly life, but she was not helpless. "I cannot leave her suffering alone if you will not send anyone to her."

Winifred began to push her heavy weight from the sofa, but Bell waved her down. Winifred was no longer young and deserved a rest after that bone-jolting journey. "I shall be right back."

"The screams are simply one of my cousin's over-dramatic models." The marquess gestured dismissively. "You are the one who should be resting with your feet up. I'll send for—"

"I do not refer to the tragedy queen." She had been running an estate since adolescence. As daunting as the gentleman's frosty demeanor might be, Bell was not intimidated. Lifting her traveling skirt, she returned to the entrance hall, sifting through her senses to find the true emotional disturbance.

With obvious impatience, the marquess caught up with her and offered his arm. She appreciated his austere attire and clean-shaven jaw. The lack of fashionably bristling facial hair revealed handsome cheekbones and square jaw seemingly carved in ice.

In fact, she had noticed him a little too much at her sister's wedding. While everyone else had been a blur of excitement and color, the marquess had been an island of self-containment. For good reason, she was drawn to his quiet capability.

She'd been reluctant to come here because of him, but the ladies had insisted she was needed. And the spirit in her head had been desperate.

That wasn't the *duke* weeping, however. She supposed a household as disturbed as this one might be dangerous to an ill man, so perhaps her task was to quiet the inhabitants.

"If your father is ill, you might wish to determine the cause of the slamming doors, my lord," she suggested, to be rid of his disturbing presence. "It might be better if I look for your hysterical guest."

"In a household of females, hysteria is a domestic commodity," he said dryly. "Drama never-ending. You really needn't concern

yourself.”

A gothic horror story was not the peaceful situation she'd been hoping to find. “You might not concern yourself, but I must.” It was not the screeching opera she heard, but she didn't wish to explain the quiet weeping, probably because she couldn't. Hearing distant sounds was not part of her experience.

She lifted her traveling gown and started up the stairs. She left the marquess ringing for servants, presumably to stop mysteriously slamming doors. She hoped he realized his castle was haunted.

Obviously, staying here meant more than account books to attend. She was fairly certain she was unable to tolerate this level of spectral and physical disturbance. It was a shame. This was such a lovely home.

She hurried up the wide marble steps to what she assumed were family quarters. The sprawling mansion was immense. She could tell simply from the heavy layers of occupation in every direction. The person she sought was not a ghost or the dramatic diva upstairs but a real and rather quiet person close by. It would make sense to keep family close together in the most easily accessible suites.

The slamming doors had stopped so she could hear with her ears and not just in her head. Bell knew she'd reached the correct door when she heard stifled sobs from the other side. She tapped on the panel. No one answered.

Normally, Bell wasn't an aggressive person, and certainly not in a strange place, but the plaintive cry of *Help my son* had struck her heart. Whatever spirit was trying to reach her had grown stronger until Bell was feeling a little desperate herself. If the spirit meant the duke, Bell didn't know how a crying woman could be hurting him. But one must start somewhere.

She rapped harder. When no one answered, she steeled herself to the necessity and let herself into a luxuriously-appointed sitting room.

An elegant lady of middle age sat sobbing into a lace-edged

handkerchief, clutching a crumpled piece of stationery.

“May I help?” Bell waited for the lady to look up before continuing. “I am Lady Craigmore. I know how to keep secrets. I think it comes with the Scots blood.”

The woman hiccupped into her handkerchief. “I keep hoping it’s a jest. I cannot believe my sensible daughter would be so foolish as to give up all this. . .” She gestured at the elegant suite. “Araminta could be a duchess one day!”

Oh dear. That sounded like impending disaster, but how did it affect the duke the spirit wished her to help? Finding the trappings for tea, Bell poured water in a kettle and set it over the fire. “Oh, we daughters can turn life upside-down and inside-out, I assure you. I’d suggest discussing this with my stepfather, except he’s on a ship to Africa.”

“Africa?” The lady sounded properly horrified.

“I am a very resourceful person.” Well, her brother-in-law was, but she knew how to spin a tale. “Let me help you. What has your daughter done?”

“Ruined herself, ruined her future, ruined everything—for a man who has nothing!” The lady broke into sobs again.

Bell winced. That sounded very bad indeed. But then, her sister had essentially done the same, except Ives had a title and a bit of land. Iona seemed to be happy without the riches she almost married.

After making the tea and placing a cup in the lady’s hand, Bell gently pried the note loose. The scrawl was execrable and tear-stained but the words were plain.

*I cannot live like this! I do not love him enough to endure the insanity, even for you, my dear mother. John is everything I can desire in a husband, and he adores me as the marquess does not. I will write when we are settled.*

The initials “AR” were the only signature.

Bell didn’t know the name of the woman the marquess was rumored to be on the verge of marrying, but she had a sinking

feeling her initials were AR.

“Young women often have spells of silliness,” Bell said as reassuringly as she was able. She had a hard time imagining anyone giving up an honorable man like the marquess, but she could understand fleeing the eccentricity of his household. “She may have realized her error and be on her way back already. You should lie down a bit. I’ll call a maid.”

The lady protested weakly, making her promise not to say anything to Rainford. That was a ridiculous suggestion since he was the only one with the power to find the straying miss. Bell didn’t promise but led the lady to the darkened bedroom.

Rainford’s home was a sprawling palace with servants who had servants. Bell might be a countess, but her home was no more than a frozen Highlands manor where she often scrubbed the dishes herself. Finding anyone to help the lady might take longer than finding the daughter.

Pretending she had experience in handling staff, Bell took the note and slipped out. To her relief, a uniformed maid hovered anxiously in the corridor. Bell sent her in to the distraught woman whose name she still did not know.

A young man in uniform was working his way down the wall of doors with a ring of keys. The slamming had blessedly stopped, along with the operatic squawks and the parrot’s cackle. She heard music and laughter in the distance, but she needed the marquess. She’d last seen him downstairs.

Apprehension gripped her, which always made her more susceptible to spirits hovering just on the other side of the veil. Tightly clutching the banister to break any fall, Bell listened for the sound of Rainford’s calm tenor as she traversed the stairs. He really did have the most soothing voice. She turned right at the bottom of the stairs and was rewarded with his words growing louder and clearer—although they were more icy than *calm*.

“What do you mean, you can’t find Davis? He should be finishing the annual accounts in his office.”

Did anyone else besides stewards do accounts? Had he already replaced his steward? Or perhaps *Davis* was an estate agent. If the marquess was in a fury, it seemed a very bad time to bring him a note about a potential runaway bride.

Waiting wasn't reasonable either. Besides, the marquess didn't seem to do fury so much as wither one like a cold frost on plants.

A footman scurried from a door on her left. She waited for him to run off on his errand before she pushed open the study door.

A hank of silver-blond hair fell rakishly across the marquess's high forehead. He'd unfastened his gray coat, revealing a cobalt-blue waistcoat embroidered in silver thread. The flat torso beneath almost had her swooning—until he glanced at her with chilly annoyance. His eyes had darkened to stormy thunderclouds.

In one hand, he was lifting and lowering a heavy weight of some sort as if contemplating flinging it at her. Thankfully, he set it down upon her entrance. "Are you done with your errand of mercy? Did one of Teddy's paramours decide to chuck herself out a window?"

"No, but a person with the initials AR has run off with a man called John, and I am assuming—since she did not introduce herself—that it is AR's mother who is having hysterics." Accustomed to blunt speaking, Bell simply lay the paper on his desk.

She had no desire to ask personal questions of a powerful, wealthy lord she hoped might employ her, but she couldn't pretend she hadn't read this note.

Her hope of finding a well-paying position in a tranquil home was fading fast.

The marquess visibly controlled himself to pick up the letter. Despite his confident air of authority, Bell was certain he grew a shade paler as he read.

She waited while he contained himself again, then gestured for her to take a seat.

"I'll be back in a moment. I'll have tea sent in and a maid escort

your traveling companion to a room.”

Truthfully, she needed to sit down. Her head throbbed from fighting off the near-hysterical spirit trying to breach her barriers. But that poor woman upstairs had to be helped.

And the *marquess*. If AR was the woman he intended to marry, as rumor had it, he had to be beyond devastated, despite all appearances.

She couldn't tell from his set expression if he meant to commit murder or suicide.

### Three

*Araminta had run off*—WITH his bespectacled, impoverished cousin.

That certainly deflated any arrogance he possessed. Rainford crisply called in men to search for the runaway couple. He needed to be certain that Araminta was safe with a man he had no reason to believe was a fortune-seeking scoundrel. Although his confidence in his judgment of character had developed a few cracks.

He ordered a groom to ride to the train station in Yatesville to verify the pair had left that way, since Davis had no other means of transportation. With no steward to send telegrams to York and London, Rain scribbled his own note to his solicitors in both cities to watch for the arrival of the runaways. He had to trust the groom to carry it to the telegraph station.

The real tragedy in this was that the duke would have heart failure of a certainty once he heard all chance of a wedding was off. Rain gritted his molars and forced himself to consider consequences. The pair had had half a day or longer to make their escape. He didn't think he could cover it up even if they were found.

With no bride, he had no hope of marrying before his father died. Rain knew the land was entailed to the title, but the fortune was separate. If Rain didn't marry before he turned thirty-five, his cousin Teddy would inherit the trust holding the funds. Like Rain, his heir would also be required to marry before he turned thirty-five if he wished to maintain control of the funds. Since Teddy was much younger, he'd have plenty of time to build a gothic monstrosity and rob his family and their offspring of their future



out of sheer incompetence.

Why was he blaming this chain of events on the quiet wren waiting in his study?

Because she'd *known* his steward would be gone. She'd known and hadn't warned him.

Retaining his icy control, Rainford returned to the countess.

He'd heard the tale of how she and her twin had cut and dyed their hair to run away from their stepfather a few months back. She was just the sort to encourage another unhappy female to do the same. He'd met Lady Craigmores when she wore brown, short tresses and deceptive servant's drab, hence his thinking of her as a wren. At the time, he'd regarded her as intriguing but unstable and possibly physically ill, therefore of no interest.

Despite having delivered a catastrophic message, the woman sitting beside his study fire was all prim posture and aristocratic poise, untouched by the chaos she'd generated. She might be wan, but her hair had grown out into a natural gilded brown that somehow glittered like gold in the firelight. Topaz eyes watched him warily over her teacup. The practical traveling gown emphasized a nicely rounded bosom and slender waist.

Rain considered throttling her out of her complacency, but he propped his hip against his desk as if he hadn't a care in the world. "Will you explain why you're here, please?"

Long lashes swept upward as she cocked her head to consider him. "The ladies at the School of Malcolms said you were in need of a house steward. My estate needs income more than it needs me. The Earl of Ives assured me yours would be a suitable position. He was most eager to help you out. If we are wrong and have been presumptuous, I'll be gone on the morrow."

Rain understood all the twisty connections here, and he might have been grateful—had his steward gone missing *before* she left home. "You traveled all the way from Edinburgh to York as a favor to Ives?"

"No, not really." She continued to study him with those

disturbing eyes. "Perhaps you might tell me if the position is open so I know how to respond?"

"I'd like to know how you knew my steward would disappear before he actually did," he countered.

"Oh. I feared it might be something like that." She set her cup aside. "My apologies. I did not mean to disturb you with the ladies' prescience. Even I did not know."

*The ladies' prescience*, of course. He was not directly related to the women running the school, but they were Malcolms, like his father's family. One never knew if they were privy to undercurrents of gossip that escaped normal people, or if they really saw things others didn't. How could he counter that declaration?

He gestured for silence while he thought. Amazingly, his guest held her tongue. Recalling the peace he'd sensed when she first entered the house, he considered her quiet presence now. Even though his sisters were still singing and apparently adding a violin to the medley, the countess emanated a composure that allowed him to *think*.

Lifting his new hand barbell up and down to calm his churning thoughts, he explained. "Araminta never tried to fit in here, even though she knew this was my home. Admittedly, it's little better than an insane asylum. I had hoped my sisters might befriend her, but their attempts only bewildered her."

He'd known all this, but he'd been assured every woman longed to be a wealthy, titled lady. As far as he was concerned, women were from another planet, so he'd accepted the platitude. Nothing in his experience had changed his mind, until now. He tried to sort out what he'd done wrong.

"I assume she's young?" the countess asked without judgment.

"Just twenty, but old enough to appear sensible." And produce numerous heirs who would keep Teddy from ever inheriting. He didn't see a reason to explain this. He wasn't sure why he was saying anything at all except that he needed a sensible head to

balance his senseless frustration. He'd pound his punching bag before he lashed out and hurt anyone.

The countess set down her empty cup. "The young are always more impetuous and passionate than rational. I assume she has a dowry, and the gentleman she ran off with is older and lacking funds?"

Rainford grunted an acknowledgement. "Aye, blame the man, of course. The maternal side of my family is not wealthy, so you're correct on that count. John has no other means of support except ours, so Araminta's dowry might be a temptation. Except my father paid for his education. We offered him the position of steward so he could gain experience. He was grateful and performed his task well. He had a good position here. He didn't *need* her dowry. Araminta must have turned his head. Women can do that to a man."

*He* had never been foolish enough to fall for a pretty face, but Rain had watched it often enough to understand how it happened. A coy laugh, flirtatious smiles, a wink. . . and a man lost all his brains.

He hadn't thought Araminta that type. She'd certainly never attempted those ploys with him.

"Oh, yes, of course, blame the lonely, young woman ignored by her host, left to her own devices in a strange house, grateful for any attention." Although her tone was devoid of emotion, the sarcasm was clear. "If your cousin and your intended mean anything to you at all, I do hope you will see them settled comfortably somewhere. It will be good for your soul. If you will call a maid to lead me to Mrs. Malcolm, I'll try not to interfere anymore. And I'll be on my way in the morning."

She rose, but Rain blocked her exit. She was slight, but taller than he expected, reaching his shoulder when she stood straight and confronted him. She might look modest, frail, and ladylike, but those were daggers in her glare.

"You blame *me* for this debacle?" he asked in surprise.

"I do not think blame is the appropriate reaction." Her tone was as tart as her expression. "Concern for the distraught woman upstairs, for the young couple facing enormous hardship. . . Those are worthy responses. I cannot help you with either of them. I have come at a bad time, and I will trouble you no more."

"You came for John's position *before he'd even left it*. That is strange timing but not exactly bad. No matter what I choose to do about the runaways, I cannot trust him enough to allow him to return to my employ. I need someone to go over his books to be certain he has not run off with the staff's wages, if nothing else. Are you capable of doing that?"

"I have a reference from Calder Castle." Her manner was still brittle. "I have spent the better part of my life handling accounts for my estate. Your books are larger, no doubt, but no different otherwise. I can do the task, but I do not want it. Your household does not meet my requirements."

His household did not meet *her* requirements? Castle Yates was known as the most luxurious, most modern estate in the kingdom. And this snippet of an impoverished countess disdained it?

A female—possibly an unstable, ill one—as steward. She was right, of course. He should let her go. But Rain was a desperate man. Desperate men did desperate things—

As if in warning, doors slammed again, the monkeys shrieked, and the opera singer shattered glass.

He stepped aside and pulled the bell rope. "You're hired. Name your terms."

*Did she want to be hired?* Wincing at the operatic scales drifting down from a distant upper story, Bell followed a maid up the marble stairs to the room she'd been assigned, next to Winifred, she hoped. She really needed to talk to someone who understood. Her desire to flee this chaos was great—but the marquess had said

she could *name her terms*.

To someone who had never had much control of her life, the temptation was formidable. She could ask for peace. And for her own maid. A place of her own—

And use of the enormous library Iona had told her about.

Unpinning her hat, taking off her gloves, Bell admired the pretty blue chamber. A thick Turkish carpet in muted blues, gold, and red hushed the click of her shoes. Gold and blue striped draperies covered large mullioned windows that looked out over the immense park surrounding the castle. A poster bed draped in ruffled gold damask promised a soft mattress and plenty of protection against winter drafts.

Was this the room one gave a steward? She assumed not.

What sounded like breaking glass in the distance rattled the spirits even more, although her heavy chamber door muted the worst of the caterwauling. The operatic cries bounced off hard surfaces, enhanced by two stories of echoes and a voice apparently designed to reach the back row of a noisy theater.

A child's abrupt cry almost startled her into a faint. Clutching the door knob, Bell steadied herself and counted backward to keep out the spirit voices. The cry stopped.

Taking a deep breath to halt her trembling, Bell knocked on a connecting door. To her relief, Winifred's cheery voice greeted her. She entered a chamber in colors almost the reverse of hers, with the gold dominating and the blue as accents.

"I've been hired," she said flatly. "I can name my terms."

Winifred nodded and gestured at a chair. "He needs you. It's obvious."

"Not to me. He has an enormous staff. I wager his housekeeper knows how to keep his accounts as well as I can." With a sigh, Bell settled in the chair and poured tea from the pot on the small table.

"And?" Winifred raised her graying eyebrows.

"And the place is such a tumult that they've thinned the veil beyond my ability to prevent spirits from crossing." Bell finally

admitted what had been bothering her ever since she'd entered this beautiful house. "I so wanted this to be a place of peace and harmony. Iona says one entire wing is devoted to every new book that is published in the kingdom. I've perused all the appropriate Malcolm journals in Calder and Wystan and have yet to find a solution to my fainting. I was hoping perhaps a medical journal. . ."

"The duke is a healer. The marquess is said to be one. They are both physicians and Malcolms. They will understand."

"I have a feeling they have enough problems of their own. I don't wish to burden them with mine."

Winifred frowned over her teacup. "The maid gossips. She said Rainford's intended has run off with one of the staff. Was that the cause of the distraught spirit you sensed?"

"That was the lady's mother, not a spirit. Do you know anything of them? I didn't even catch a name. Are they wealthy? Titled? Why, after all these years, did the marquess settle on a flighty young miss?"

"The Honorable Araminta Rutledge, second daughter of Baron Rutledge, very old family, wealthy enough, although not to the duke's level." Winifred nodded knowingly. "It's not a spectacular match, but Rainford has no need to marry wealth or title. Since he does not seem an unintelligent man, one assumes he looked for character."

"As well as age and looks," Bell added cynically. "She is only twenty."

With her graying hair pulled back in a simple chignon, Winifred appeared the part of wise sage that she was. "Rainford is a Malcolm. Unless he marries an Ives, his chances of producing a son are slim. The current duke only had the one son and quite a few daughters. His younger brother only had one son. The pattern dates back a century or longer, one or two sons and no more. The Rutledges are related to the Ives in some manner, so her ability to produce heirs may have been a deciding factor."

One of the reasons Bell's title came down through the female line was her Malcolm heritage. She understood the dilemma—Malcolms produced girls. "And the current duke is dying, so there must be extra pressure on the marquess to marry. No wonder the place is practically bursting with tension. The question becomes, do I stay or not? I certainly don't wish to add to their burden, but naming my own terms is a temptation."

"You said a spirit asked you to save the duke. I have no idea how that is possible, but I don't think you can leave until you learn more." Winifred finished her tea and looked sad. "I wish I could stay to help."

"No, your son is ill. He needs you. I have many people to call on, if need be. Your son has only you. You're hardly leaving me in a dangerous situation! Compared to Craigmores, Castle Yates is heaven on earth."

"Methinks she doth protest too much." Winifred smiled and stayed seated while Bell rose. "But you're correct. You shouldn't come to harm here. I do hope you'll find someone to travel with you if you decide to leave. Fainting on a train cannot be healthy for a woman alone."

"I'll ask for enough salary to hire a travel companion," Bell promised. "But for now, I have need to shut up that wailing human banshee agitating the spirits."

"That's not the task of a steward, dear," Winifred reminded her, smiling faintly.

"That's the task of anyone concerned about the poor patient confined to bed and forced to listen. I cannot imagine why anyone allows it to continue." She headed for the door.

"And here I thought you were supposed to be the quiet, bookish twin."

Bell stifled a small laugh. "I'm only quiet because Iona is so vocal. I know how to speak for myself. My main concern is avoiding breaking my neck on the stairs if the noise startles me into the vapors."

“You mustn’t let fear control you.” Her companion frowned in concern.

“Fear leads to caution, which in my case, is a good thing. It prevents me from being as rash as Iona.” Bell slipped back into her chamber before Winifred could warn her that living in fear wasn’t much of a life. She knew that. She simply had no choice.

*Save my son* rang in her head as she checked her reflection. Brushing and pinning the dyed ends of her too-short hair into a tighter knot, she was relieved that her normal golden-brown color was almost back. She shook the wrinkles from her travel gown, wondering if she was expected down to dinner. She had no maid to press her one decent evening dress.

She could demand a maid as part of the terms of her agreement.

She had to learn to live her life as a normal person and not let it be controlled by the spirits of people long gone. Occasionally, though, her life and a spirit’s request intersected. Perhaps she should heed the frantic ghost’s call.

The wide corridor outside her chamber seemed to sprawl half a mile in both directions. The marble stairs did not continue upward past the suites situated at the first landing. But at each end of the hall were spiral staircases, where the corridors connected with more wings. Following the agitated spirits and a now-muted argument above, she turned left from her chamber. Grimly clutching the stair rail, she ascended to the next floor. The treads spiraled up another level, but the voices seemed close.

A woman’s sudden outburst of fury rattled the rafters. More doors slammed. Bell studied this upper corridor where the rooms appeared to be smaller, judging by the frequency of the doors on her right. On her left, the wall held a gallery of oil paintings, mostly darkened old things of ancestors, with the occasional bust or statue to break up the effect.

“You never listen!” an operatic female cried from behind one of the panels. “We belong in London! We could be glorious together!”



Bell couldn't interpret the male rumble that replied. Whatever he said was apparently not what the woman wished to hear. She screeched in high C, shaking the sconces on the wall—possibly the reason the art displayed was stone and not delicate porcelain.

A door on her right slammed open and a tall, voluptuous woman with blue-black hair emerged in a towering rage, flinging curses over her shoulder. In her fury, she almost stumbled over Bell, who waited patiently to be noticed.

"What are you doing here?" the woman demanded, righting herself with a distinctly ruffled-feather fluff of her fashionable taffeta skirt—in black, of course. "He has no appointments today."

"I'm merely here to request the simple human decency of peace and quiet. The duke is ill and should not be disturbed by this level of drama." Bell was accustomed to the authority of her small estate and did not shy from it. Still, she knew this was an overstepping of boundaries.

But the spirit battering to enter her head quieted, as if waiting for a response.

A big, burly, auburn-bearded man appeared in the open doorway, a paintbrush in hand. "Carla only speaks diva. We didn't mean to disturb the duke. Carla, you can go away now. London is calling."

Ruby red lips parted but before a noise could emerge, a door slammed, and Bell held up her hand. "You are ripping a hole in the veil with your voice. Can you not tell you've disturbed the spirits? Doors do not slam of their own accord."

Both diva and bearded man stared at her, wide-eyed. Oh well, if she named her own terms, then accepting her weirdness must be one of them.

"You are a spiritualist?" the diva finally asked, in an almost normal timbre.

"I do not hold séances, if that's what you ask. But this house is inhabited by many spirits who would normally coexist quietly with the living. Except they tend to hover if someone is dying, and they

are as affected by disharmony as the rest of us are. You would do everyone a favor if you would keep your disagreements to a low roar.”

“Who the devil are you?” The bearded man leaned against the door jamb, appearing amused. “Did Rain bring you in to natter everyone into behaving?”

“I brought myself. The spirit’s cries for help reached me all the way in Edinburgh, that is how much you’re disturbing the afterworld. Perhaps you should do what the lady asks and go to London.” Bell only exaggerated a little. She didn’t think this smug pair would listen otherwise.

“See, I am right! We must go to London. Your loved ones beyond the veil say so.” The diva glared at the painter.

Burly man shook his head negatively. “Not leaving. I’m designing an architectural masterpiece that will bring the world to our door once I have the funds. I’ll not hasten my ducal uncle’s demise, but I’ll be here when he departs this mortal coil. So shut up, Carla. I refuse to be blamed if he dies during one of your operatic dirges.”

He held up his hand the instant the diva opened her mouth. Glaring, she flounced away.

“I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced.” He held out his hand. “I’m Theodore Winchester, Junior, Rainford’s heir. And you are?”

“The Countess of Craigmore and Rainford’s new steward.” Not accepting his paint-splattered hand, she curtsied and walked away, her mission accomplished.

She almost heard the spirits sighing in relief. One might have been sniggering, but she refused to notice.

She had done it now, accepted a position in a house filled with more turmoil than anything her small estate had ever produced, even during her stepfather’s drunken rages.

RELIEVED by the miracle of silence briefly descending on the old halls, Rain made case notes in one of his medical journals pertaining to an interesting patient.

A commotion on the stairs, followed by the piercing tones of Teddy's current mistress, dispelled any illusion of peace. He winced as a trunk hit marble and the voice reached levels that could rattle chandeliers.

Groaning in frustration at a knock on his door, but already distracted, he gave permission for entry. Curiosity was a terrible thing.

His youngest, unmarried, sister Alicia slipped in and closed the door, looking conspiratorial. "What did you say to Carla? I didn't think she would be removed by anything short of a shotgun."

Rain sat back and tapped his pen on the desk. Alicia had the family pale blond looks, plus the Malcolm blue eyes he lacked. She was plain and perhaps a little chubby—and a terrible pianist—but she was smart and kind, and any man should be proud to call her his own. So far, she'd resisted accepting any. Was it possible for a female to be as hardheaded as he?

"You know this is the family home, and I will not send any of you into exile." Because they'd all end up in the streets. The eccentricity of their family was the reason the castle had grown into a sprawling village of separated apartments. "Teddy must have tired of her." Which didn't seem likely either. His cousin was too lazy to actively chase away a convenient bedmate, no matter how annoying the female might be.

"No, he's telling her he hasn't finished her portrait, and she

shouldn't be quite so hasty. I assumed you'd insulted her, and I was wondering how that was done. I'd like to learn." Alicia cracked the door to listen.

"Not me. You'll have to ask Teddy. I'd like to learn, too." Intrigued, Rain stood up to spy.

"Being polite is overrated," Alicia whispered. "Our teachers should have taught us to defend ourselves."

"When one has power and wealth, it is only responsible to wield them for the benefit of others." Rain repeated the refrain they'd been taught since birth.

"But at some point, benefit becomes sponging," Alicia added callously.

Rain didn't argue the point. "This is Teddy's home as well as ours. It's certainly large enough for all of us."

"Not for an entire opera company."

Alicia was prone to exaggeration.

Doors had stopped slamming, Rain realized. If the diva left and Alicia stayed away from the piano, he might almost be able to think again. He should return to work in this brief respite, but it was almost time to change for dinner. Oh well, might as well satisfy his curiosity.

They emerged into the corridor to watch a parade of servants carrying enough baggage to fill an entire train car.

"Do we have enough carriages?" Rain wondered aloud.

"I assume that was rhetorical." Alicia followed in the path of trunks and hatboxes and valises to the front door and peered out. "The berlin, the brougham, and a hay cart, I believe."

Rain turned his attention upward. A bearded bear of a man, Teddy Jr. watched mournfully from the top of the stairs. Having just lost the woman he'd intended to marry, Rain could appreciate his cousin's dismay. And maybe enjoy a little satisfaction that Teddy had to suffer, too, since the opera star's dramatics could partially be blamed for Araminta's departure.

"Is it true that Miss Rutledge left earlier?" Alicia apparently

followed his thoughts.

“Along with Mr. Davis, yes.” Rain saw no reason to deny it. “They reportedly bought train tickets to York. I suppose there’s a bishop there where they can obtain a license.”

“Do you think I drove them away?” His sister fretted. “We are writing a musical, and we became a trifle noisy, I fear.”

Yes, he thought the musical might have been part of the insanity Araminta complained about, but that was her problem, not Alicia’s. “You are entitled to sing and pound instruments to your heart’s content in your own home. Although I do hope you’ll keep it quieter than our departing diva after dark.”

Alicia snickered. “I don’t do the things the diva does after dark. I’m not married.”

“And you shouldn’t know what married people do. Your sisters should be ashamed of themselves. Where are they, anyway?”

“Watching from the gallery above and laying wagers on what you and Teddy did to drive away your lady friends.”

To Rain’s surprise, Araminta’s mother trailed down after the parade of footmen, wearing her travel clothes and accompanied by her personal maid. She stopped and held out her gloved hand to him.

“I am so very sorry, my lord. I truly had no idea. . . . I think it best to accept Mrs. Bianco’s offer of her company into York. I’ll hope my daughter will have the sense to look for me in our home. Your hospitality has been all that is generous. Please, give Lady Craigmores my gratitude for her aid.”

“Lady. . .” Alicia shut up when Rain squeezed her elbow.

“If there is anything you need, please do not hesitate to let me know.” He bowed over her hand. One of the reasons he’d decided on Araminta had been her sensible mother. He’d hoped *like mother, like daughter*. Obviously, he knew nothing of women. He’d lost his own mother at an early age.

As if he’d willed her into being, the lady whom Alicia was longing to hear about appeared at the top of the stairs. The

countess still wore her travel costume but had not donned hat or gloves, so Rain assumed she hadn't decided to run away, too. Seeing him, she hesitated, then caught the banister in a death grip as she descended.

"You have decided to banish all our guests as a money-saving endeavor?" Rain asked once she came to a halt in front of them.

"More of a sanity-saving endeavor," she admitted. "I feared your ghosts would smash through the veil and wreak havoc if the emotional outbursts continued, so I suggested the lady be a little more quiet. She objected. If I have overstepped my bounds, I do not apologize. You may send me away at any time."

"You *want* me to send you away," he accused.

She tilted her head and considered her reply. "No, I would like the position, I believe. But I am tired of living in unpleasant circumstances, and thought perhaps others might be, too, especially your father."

Rain wasn't given to expressing himself, but her bland tale of routing a monster almost surprised him into a laugh. "Your frankness is refreshing. Does everyone in your rural hamlet speak in the same way?"

She spoiled her smooth brow by thinking about it. Underneath a wispy fringe, her hairline formed a widow's peak. So many Malcolms had one, including himself, that he wondered if they'd not once been called a *witch's* peak.

"Mostly, the villagers did not speak at all, but yes, if I ordered a shepherd to move his sheep, he would tell me why he could not. Clear communication seems sensible." She turned to Alicia. "May I be introduced? It's rather tiresome not knowing anyone's names."

Alicia elbowed Rain aside and held out her hand. "You must be Lady Craigmores. I'm Alicia Winchester, Rain's sister. I'm writing a musical. Do you sing?"

"An occasional hymn or two. It's not an art I've developed, my lady. Does the music room have doors?"

Rain couldn't hold back his snigger this time. "She's telling you

to close the damned doors, dear sister.”

Alicia glared at him.

Lady Craigmores corrected him. “Actually, it’s the spirit trying to tell you by slamming doors. Since she is also saying *Save my son*, and names the duke, I will assume your grandmother is a very strong presence in this house.”

“My *grandmother*—”

Alicia squealed in delight before Rain could express his dismay at this insanity.

“We can hold a *real* séance!”

Maybe it was time to catch a train to anywhere but here.

BELL DISTRACTED LADY ALICIA from any disappointment at the refusal of a séance by enlisting help with her meager wardrobe. Before she knew it, she had all four of Rain’s sisters crowded into her chamber, along with a lady’s maid and a seamstress and apparently every discarded gown they’d ever owned.

She had not specified that the terms of her employment include a new wardrobe. The ladies were obviously bored.

All four sisters were varying shades of blond, of average height, and opinionated.

“If we bunch up the silk in the back, we can make a train and reduce the front of the gown to the current style.” Victoria, Lady Delahey, the eldest sister, held up a midnight blue gown of last decade’s fashion. “I’ll never fit that waist again.”

“Brighter colors,” Lady Estelle declared, holding up a gold-and-white-striped confection. She’d apparently married someone of a lesser title and kept her courtesy one.

Bewildered by the choices, Bell simply did her best to keep up with who was whom. The quietest sister, Mrs. Salina Lombard, appeared to be only a few years older than Lady Alicia, and had abandoned her courtesy title to take her solicitor husband’s name.

She merely made notes and attached them to the gowns to pass on to the seamstress.

“I am to be a steward,” Bell protested—again. “I need only wear a simple dark gown to sit in an office all day. I was only concerned if I must occasionally sit at a formal table. My dinner gown needs pressing, that’s all!”

“Don’t be foolish.” Lady Estelle picked through the pile of gowns the ladies had left behind when they married. “None of us can wear these tiny bodices any longer, so we have no incentive to make them over for ourselves. They’re excellent quality. Look at the blond lace on this one! It will look fabulous with your coloring.”

Their colors suited Bell as well, although she feared she’d fade into nothingness with the midnight blue. Still, it was a lovely shade, one that flattered their Malcolm eyes and not her golden-brown ones.

Before she could protest again, Lady Alicia swept around the room holding a gown with an enormous train. “You must have dinner with us. You’re a countess first and foremost. You will distract Rain from his dismals over losing Araminta.”

“And you will help us make lists of other suitable heiresses he might marry.” Lady Estelle handed the gold gown over to the seamstress. “Unless, of course, you know of any magic spells to cure our father. If he were healthy again, Rain could take his time.”

“I’m not a healer.” Bell attempted to dissuade them of her ability to do anything other than keep books. “And I’m from far northern Scotland. I don’t know many people. If the duke can’t heal himself and Rainford can’t help him either, then don’t count on me for anything.”

“What if it’s a spiritual ailment?” Lady Alicia asked. “You really need to speak with the spirits.”

Ah, there was the crux of the matter. They were Malcolms. They believed in life beyond death. And like everyone else, they



were eager to speak to those long gone.

"I cannot imagine why anyone would deliberately *invite* a spirit into their life," Bell said firmly. "Don't you have enough people interfering without asking one from a different time and place? They are not better, smarter people for having passed on."

"But it's exciting." Lady Delahey picked off lace that had merely been basted to a sleeve. "Our grandmother, the fourth duchess, died when our Uncle Theodore was born, so we never knew her. It would be wonderful to speak with her."

Bell shook her head. "How long ago was that, half a century? Back during the Regency? What precisely do you expect her to say after all these years?"

"Well, she could scold her grandson Teddy Junior for being such a bounder," Lady Delahey suggested. "If Teddy weren't such a perfect mug, Rain wouldn't have to worry so much about his inheriting the family trust."

"Blame that predicament on our great-grandfather." Lady Estelle snapped angrily at a thread. "He's the one who set the terms."

"Well, his intentions were good." Quiet Mrs. Lombard pinned the lace and another note to the seamstress on a tan bodice. "His father was crazy, after all, and he married a Malcolm who couldn't promise him an heir. Our family was never normal, so it makes sense to separate the funds from the title."

None of this was her business, and Bell didn't question. But she listened intently, looking for the reason the spirit insisted that she save the duke.

"It would make more sense if an objective party determined which heir was craziest." Lady Estelle laughed and dug through the pile of clothes. "Rainford is perfectly sane, unlike Teddy. But he chose not to marry until too late, which does make him a little. . ."

"Normal." Lady Alicia defended him. "He didn't expect Father to become ill so young."

"Try this one on. I think it will fit without too much

adjustment.” Lady Delahey, the oldest and bossiest sister, began unhooking Bell’s bodice. “We must keep Father well until Rain can marry. Marriage will at least delay the trust’s second clause for a few years.”

“We really need a list of unmarried Ives females. Did Rain ever make one?”

“He did. We’ve entertained them all. He simply wasn’t interested.”

“I don’t know why Araminta interested him. She was quite dull.”

Bell gave up trying to follow who said what. She let the ladies push and pull her around while she simply absorbed information and attempted to keep out prying spirits. Having her head full of gossip, silks, and lace helped tremendously, she discovered. Having only one sister and no wardrobe, she’d never learned that defense.

By the time the sisters rushed off to dress for dinner, Bell was garbed in a modest copper-colored dinner gown only a year or two old that none of the married ladies could wear any longer, and Lady Alicia declared too mature for her taste. It had ruffles instead of lace forming the bustle of the upper skirt. The practical brown of the under skirt had ruffles as well. Bell thought she could wear it regularly, perhaps with a different bodice every so often.

As soon as the room quieted, Winifred knocked on the connecting door. When the widow entered, she admired the results of the wardrobe addition.

“We’ll add some of those pretty topaz earrings, and you’ll look perfect for a family dinner. I’m feeling better leaving you with his sisters about. I’ll go down with you this evening so you feel comfortable, but I think you’ll be happy here.” She helped Bell tease a few loose curls around her face.

Bell didn’t mention that the winter holidays had to end and the sisters had to go back to their own homes sometime. Presumably, Lady Alicia would remain.

“What we need to do now is visit the duke,” Bell decided. “How

do I go about that?”

## Five

ONE OF THE many reasons Rain encouraged his sisters to visit was so he could enjoy the company of their sensible—ungifted—spouses. Large dowries had allowed his non-prepossessing but highly intelligent sisters to choose men who suited them. They'd done well.

Rain didn't know why he couldn't manage the same.

Teddy had deigned to join them for dinner, apparently so he could publicly mope. He wasn't any more successful at finding a bride than Rain, but he was younger and still had time to look, although the portrait ploy didn't appear to be the way to attract the best candidates.

Rain did his best not to pay attention to the countess, which would only encourage his family's matchmaking antics. Lady Craigmores had dressed sedately in a rusty brown dinner gown he vaguely recognized. She spoke only when spoken to, which seemed strange given her predilection for saying what she thought.

"How does a countess become a steward?" Teddy asked, demanding her attention.

The lady picked delicately at her fish, obviously choosing her words. "By running an estate, I assume. Craigmores never had the luxury of hiring people to do what we could do ourselves."

"You lost the estate?" Lord Delahey asked sympathetically.

Rain watched a slight smile cross the lady's pixie features. Give her fairy wings and set her in a woodland. . .

"No, I'm *saving* it. My tenants are more capable than I am at farming and sheepherding. By living here, I am saving the expense of my upkeep. And my foreman and his family can live in the

manor, thus saving the expense of repairing a cottage for their use. The manor is far too large for one person. And if he wants servants, he pays for them, not the estate. Any income I earn will go to paying off my stepfather's debts. The village desperately needs and deserves reimbursement for their losses."

"We should have a dinner to introduce Lady Craigmore and invite the neighbors," Alicia announced. "We'll invite eligible bachelors. Then you might attract a husband and have a home of your own."

There was much laughter and jesting about Alicia doing the same. Rain watched the countess. She merely finished her fish and sipped from her watered wine.

"Yatesville is too far a distance for most people. Weather this time of year is too inclement for reliable travel." Estelle gestured with her fork to encompass the table. "We all ought to be making arrangements to return home before we're snowed in."

"You're welcome to stay." Rain indicated to a footman that he was ready for the next course. "I enjoy the company."

Not precisely a lie. He wasn't a hermit. He liked company. His sisters, on the other hand, were a meddling handful. Together, they could wreak a path of destruction wider than a hurricane. He simply didn't wish to be left alone with his dying father.

They argued over whether it was best to travel with children now or later, and who had what business to attend and when. The toddlers in the nursery were better behaved than the adults in Rain's opinion, but then, he never went up there.

Lady Craigmore appeared intrigued to learn there was a nursery, but she had nothing to contribute to the discussion.

When the ladies departed to leave the gentlemen with their port, Salina's husband, Lombard, passed around cigars. "We're expecting another come summer. Sal was hoping she might have it here again. The countess's companion is a midwife, ain't she?"

"As I understand it, Mrs. Malcolm is on her way to visit her ill son, but we have Malcolm midwives and healers not far away. All

of you are always welcome.” And Rain was on hand for medical emergencies, he didn’t say. Helping his sister with her lying-in wasn’t high on his wish list.

“There is nothing any of the healers can do for the duke?” Lord Delahey asked, setting aside his cigar in favor of port.

“We brought Father here in hopes one of the local healers might, but so far, his condition is unchanged.” Rain took little consolation in knowing even the experienced ladies with their herbals couldn’t improve upon his medical knowledge. “His body is simply wearing out faster than it should. It’s good for him to have family around.”

“You should be in London when the session opens. We’ll need the duke’s proxy vote.” Garland, Estelle’s husband, blew a smoke ring. “Will you have the staff to open up the town house?”

They wanted free lodging, of course. Rain didn’t mind. “I suppose it depends on circumstances. I’ll remain here if his condition worsens. I might spare a second tier of servants if you need the house and the caretakers aren’t sufficient.”

His gut clenched at what he wasn’t saying. His father wasn’t terribly political. If the duke died, there wouldn’t be any gaping hole in the Lords, just in their lives—and pockets. If Rain didn’t keep control of the trust, they couldn’t rely on Teddy allowing expenditures for the London house and servants.

The loss of control was one more reason to grit his molars to nubbins.

After finishing their port and returning to the ladies, Rain discovered the countess and Alicia had already departed. He supposed he could introduce the lady to the estate books and discuss terms in the morning. It had been a long day, after all.

“Alicia decided not to entertain us this evening?” He was rather relieved at that.

“She took the countess upstairs to meet Father.” Victoria complacently knitted at a baby cap.

Rain had a really bad feeling about that. Excusing himself, he

clenched his teeth and strolled up the stairs.

“GOOD EVENING, YOUR GRACE.” Bell curtsied for the lean man sitting up against the pillows. He appeared almost skeletal against the vivid maroon of his dressing gown, but she could see where Rainford had inherited his aristocratic cheekbones and regal bearing. “I hope we are not disturbing you.”

“Not at all.” He gestured with his long, slender fingers. “Please, have a seat so I do not feel guilty for not standing up. Alicia, where is your brother?”

“Rain is entertaining the husbands, of course.” Alicia plopped into a chair and propped her feet in an unladylike fashion on the bottom of the bed. “We have had a very exciting day.”

Back straight, hands crossed in her lap, Bell settled in a chair near the head of the bed. “I fear I have been unintentionally the cause of much of it.”

“I doubt you’re the cause of Miss Rutledge’s departure.” The duke took a sip from a glass on the bedside table. “That’s entirely on Rain’s head.”

“The servants have been gossiping.” Alicia made a moue of disapproval.

“No, Rain sent me a note.” He pointed at a paper beside the glass. “Said he’d be up to explain as soon as the dust settled. I assume the dust isn’t quite settled?”

“Oh, well, after that, Mrs. Bianco departed in a huff and a circus, and Lady Rutledge left with her, and of course, Lady Craigmores arrived, and we’re all at sixes and sevens.” Alicia seemed quite pleased with the chaos.

“Ah, yes, the house did seem remarkably quieter. And you have finished your musical?” He lifted his sparse, graying eyebrows.

“No, it is very bad.” Alicia grimaced. “Perhaps I should take up painting instead. Teddy seems to do well.”

"I think," Bell said quietly, "if you have not found a desperate desire to splash paint on canvas, you may not have a gift for art, either."

The duke nodded in agreement. "Teddy started drawing on walls the instant he could put his pudgy hands around pencils. That is how he expresses himself."

Alicia kicked the bed but didn't disagree.

"And you, Lady Craigmores? I understand you have a gift for ghosts? I had an ancestor who talked to the Sommersville ghosts." The duke waited in interest.

Bell tried not to look too pained. "I believe I've read her journals. I am not quite so sanguine about speaking to spirits. I generally do not *see* ghosts as your ancestor did. They invade my head and clamor to be heard and are not necessarily related to you or me or anyone useful. I am attempting to learn to block them out."

"But you listened to the one that brought you here."

Startled by the male voice in the doorway, Bell grabbed the chair arm and counted backward from a hundred. Once she'd steadied herself, she shot the marquess a glare. "I listened to Lady Agatha and Lady Gertrude, who told me you had a position."

The marquess crossed his arms and leaned his shoulder against the door jamb. In the dim light, his hair appeared frost colored. "That's not all you told me."

She refused to disturb the duke by mentioning the spirit of his mother. Standing, she dipped a curtsy. "It is good to meet you, your grace. I'll leave you to discuss the day's events with your son. I should help Mrs. Malcolm with her packing."

"Rain, you are such a stick-in-the-mud! No wonder Araminta left you. Now you are even driving away Lady Craigmores." Alicia glared at her brother.

"Your brother believes he is being protective. One would think his sisters would have cured him of that habit by now." Bell refused to squeeze through the doorway until the marquess shifted.



“If you will excuse me?”

He'd shaved before dinner. She could smell his spicy soap. To her, Rainford was intimidatingly tall and broad. His Ives cousins were more muscular, she supposed. She'd simply rather not be exposed to all that. . . towering arrogance. . . at close proximity.

“It is my responsibility to be protective of my family.” He didn't move. “It is only because you are on the fringe of our family that I have hired you. I'll see you in your office at nine, and we'll take a look at what Davis has left behind.”

He finally stepped aside, allowing her to pass. Bell was aware of his gaze on her as she hurried down the hall.

She wanted to curse interfering men, but she had to respect the marquess for looking after his fractious relations. She'd never had a man like that in her life. Experience had taught her she didn't need one. She hoped the marquess would recognize that, or she'd never be able to stay.

Winifred really didn't require aid in packing, but Bell wanted the comfort of her sensible presence for one last evening. After this, she'd be entirely on her own in a strange household. She'd learned how to do it once, when she was running for her life. She could do it again—with sufficient incentive.

“You met the duke!” Winifred beamed at her proudly when Bell told her. “How does he seem?”

“It is hard for me to judge, since I didn't know him when he was healthy. He's a large man like his son, but he seems all skin and bones, as if he needs nourishment.”

Winifred tapped a small ledger she'd left on the table. “I've copied all the herbal recipes I know for nourishing invalids in here. I'm sure Rainford has his own, but it doesn't hurt for him to compare. That young cousin of his who will inherit does not seem quite mature enough to handle great responsibility. I'm not one for prolonging life when a person is ready to go, mind you, but keeping the duke alive seems essential for more reasons than one.”

“Surely a man like the marquess will have no difficulty in

finding another bride? Perhaps he's learned his lesson and will choose one willing to marry quickly." Bell flipped through the notebook, but she knew very little of herbal remedies. She had a slight affinity for bees, but her specialty apparently was *dead* people.

"Marry a woman who simply wishes to be a marchioness and a duchess one day? That seems a lonely way to choose a bride, but perhaps he finds companionship elsewhere." Winifred laid out her traveling gown for the morrow.

"You mean a mistress? That might be another reason Miss Rutledge ran away. And if she wasn't as intelligent or sophisticated as his sisters, there is still another reason. They are a force of nature. It would be difficult to find a bride who could stand up to them."

"Except another Malcolm." Winifred's eyes twinkled. "Only he needs a woman who will bear him a son."

Bell wrinkled her nose, knowing the argument there. "And there are very few Ives females. I am not familiar enough with the family to know if there are any the right age and marriage status. I'm sure he has a list. Do not look to me to help him in his search. I am simply praying his lovesick steward did not leave the books in a muddle."

"It is a shame the English do not allow estates to pass through the female line as the Scots do. Very short-sighted of them, I'm sure." Winifred squeezed her trunk closed.

"Giving women power may be why Edinburgh is a city of enlightenment and London is a cesspool." Bell laughed at the old argument.

"Well, until the world is run by women, we'll never know how much better we are. We need more women like you, striking out in a way that I hope will carve paths for the future. We shouldn't be forced to sit in dark corners, knitting, because we have no husbands. That's foolishness."

"I'm not much of a flag bearer for women's rights." Bell smiled

at the notion. "I simply want to help the people who suffered because of my stepfather and to have a chance to read in Rainford's library. You'll have to find someone else to lead your parade."

Winifred patted her cheek. "Start with young Alicia. She's looking for more than her sisters have."

"The marquess would no doubt kill me if I set her down a career path!" Appalled and amused, Bell put water on for tea.

But Alicia really did need some means to occupy her active mind. It was a pity the useless spirits in Bell's head couldn't help.

THE NEXT MORNING, Bell opened her door to head down to breakfast. Startled by the obstacle almost tripping her in the doorway, she had to grab the door frame to prevent stumbling headfirst into the hall.

A rather large male body blocked her path. The beard and painters' smock identified him immediately. Why Mr. Winchester was sleeping on the floor was a little more difficult to determine.

She definitely wasn't stepping over him. Just as she was about to close the door, he lifted his shaggy head and said blearily, "I must paint you."

"No, I don't think so." Quietly, she closed the door and turned the lock, then retreated to the connecting door.

Winifred was dressed and already ordering servants to take down her luggage. She admitted Bell with amusement. "It seems you are the new object of the heir's affections."

"If the servants know he's out there, they could have removed him." Disgruntled at the unexpected start to her day, Bell followed her companion to the hall, some distance from where Teddy now snored.

"Apparently the rest of the family lives in different wings of the house and no one of authority has discovered him yet. Large households have interesting hierarchies." Skirting around the sleeping painter, Winifred strode unhurriedly toward the stairs.

"I shall ask if a steward is allowed to order servants about. I should think even the housekeeper and butler would have the authority to have a drunk removed from the floor." Bell had far too much experience in drunken family members to wish to encounter

them in her new position.

The slamming doors and shrieking creatures had apparently quieted with the departure of the diva. Or perhaps they were simply not awake yet.

“Learning how the family functions is part of your task. Malcolms tend to act independently and are broad-minded enough not to interfere with each other’s habits. You’ve lived in too small a household to understand the dynamics, I suppose.”

“Everything and everyone has a place.” Bell liked order. Drunks on her doorstep were not orderly.

“I’m sure you’ll have them all in hand in no time.” Complacently, Winifred led the way into the breakfast room, where an enormous buffet was laid out and not a soul sat there to enjoy it.

“I think I preferred Calder Castle’s more frugal ways.” With a sigh, Bell helped herself to a cup of tea and some toast.

With a long trip ahead of her, Winifred filled her plate generously. “Your former employer was as accustomed to living in poverty as you are. The rich, like the marquess, are different. You must adapt to his ways, not the other way around. I hope you are not biting off more than you can chew.”

Bell glanced from her thin slice of toast to the older woman and smiled. “I’ll nibble and be fine.”

Just to prove her wrong, Lady Delahey and her husband swept in carrying a wailing infant and shouting for the servants. A door slammed above, and in the distance, a fiddle screeched up and down the scales.

Bell clung to the edge of the table until the dizziness passed. Perhaps she would take breakfast in her room from henceforth.

“It is late,” she declared, rising from the table. “I’m to meet Rainford in the office at nine, if someone could direct me?”

Not daring to return to her room if Teddy was still there, Bell obtained directions, hugged Winifred, and made her farewells. Then she took deep breaths and plunged into the interior of the

enormous house for the first day of her new life. In a grim way, the notion was exciting.

The two-story entryway with its enormous windows added brightness to the front rooms even on a gloomy day. The back halls had no such illumination. If it were not for gaslights, she'd have to carry a lantern to traverse the confusing array of corridors.

Reaching a conservatory at the back of the house, Bell sighed in relief, turned right, and found what Lady Delahey had called the office wing. A billiard table in one room, with an antler candle fixture over it, gave the lie to that label. A stuffy study with a table and humidors and crystal decanters appeared to be more gentleman's smoking room than study. She wondered where the library might be. Not down this wing, apparently.

Past the conservatory, she finally found a room filled with old ledgers and a battered desk. It had its own grate, she noted with relief. The corridor was quite chilly. She assumed the last two rooms near the exit door belonged to the estate agents she would meet sooner or later.

A stack of ledgers waited on the wide desk. A tray of invoices demanded attention. Bell thought she could be comfortable here. She couldn't even hear the slamming doors or fiddle.

She crouched down to set a fire to the kindling in the grate, but crumpled papers made her curious. She had just pried them out when Rainford entered. Since she'd been expecting him, she wasn't startled enough to lose her balance. She smoothed out the sheet of handwriting. "It looks as if your cousin spent a great deal of effort attempting to compose a letter to you."

"His actions speak louder than words." Dismissing the crumpled paper, the marquess swiftly flipped through the stack of ledgers to find the one he wanted.

Bell finally understood the fallacy of believing she could fill this position. Her former employer had been female. Lydia had been a welcome presence in Bell's office.

The Marquess of Rainford, on the other hand, was an

intimidating force. Even at this hour, he was formally dressed in cravat and suit coat, his shoes polished to a high gloss.

She hurriedly stood up and wondered if she should take a seat behind the desk or wait for him to indicate that she do so.

Holding the crumpled letter, she crossed her hands in her modest skirt. "If Mr. Davis left the books in good order, that speaks to his character as well."

Rainford thumbed through the ledger he'd chosen. "The servants' wages appear to have been paid on time. I'll allow you to determine if the figures are accurate. Our household expenses do not differ greatly from one year to the next. You should be able to make comparisons."

"I'll do that, of course, and compare to your current invoices as well. Numbers do not lie when you know how to view them." That was comfortable ground. Rainford's presence was not. She was entirely too aware of his tension.

He slammed down the ledger and Bell jumped.

"Davis used to handle my correspondence. How good is your hand?"

Men were so disruptively *loud*. She steadied herself to reply. "Reasonably good. I handled Lydia's. She had far more correspondence than bookkeeping. I may not have a university education, but I have experience and the ability to learn quickly." She stood straight and attempted to breathe without meeting the stormy gray of his eyes.

He didn't make it easy. The room was small and cluttered. His silver-blond hair and strikingly angular features gave the appearance of a cold angel with invisible wings that occupied all the space. Bell didn't dare light the fire because she had to stand on the hearth to keep her distance. Her skirt would go up in a blaze.

In irritation, he gestured for her to take the wooden chair behind the desk. "Your office, your chair. Sit. I'll not trouble you with correspondence just yet. Familiarize yourself with the books,

and if you have anything to report, leave it on the desk in my study.”

She skirted around him and took the seat. It had wheels. She almost rolled backward. The shock should have jarred her comatose, but she seemed to be adapting to constant surprise in his presence. Her feet didn’t quite reach the floor, so she grabbed the desk to prevent hitting the window behind her. “And if I have questions?”

“I see patients from ten to twelve and two to four today. Outside those hours, I’m usually in my study. I trust you’ll not be popping in and out regularly, or I’ll lock the door.”

She almost laughed, understanding his curtness. “I’ll make a list of questions and present them with my report on the books, along with the terms of my contract.” She knew how to be as curt and crisp as he. It might be her only defense in a family like his.

“I understand my cousin has already importuned you. The evenings are yours to do as you please. You’ll have Sundays off, if you last that long. Is there anything else?” No expression marred his angular features to reveal his opinion of his heir’s antics.

“May I have use of the library? And will the servants accept my authority if I give them orders?” Bell ignored mention of Teddy. She’d take care of that nuisance on her own.

“I’ll tell the librarian to give you a key. Our former steward preferred that orders come from me. To be frank, the constant interruptions were a bloody nuisance, excuse my language. I’ll let the Franklins know that you speak for me, within reason, of course. Ordering extravagant expenditures is relegated to my family.” His tone was desert dry.

Bell thought she detected the slightest whisper of humor, but she was nervous and refrained from judging someone she barely knew. “Thank you, my lord. I’ll expect a salary commensurate to the one you paid Davis.”

“You are female and uneducated,” he countered. “That is unheard of. Davis was family and had to support—”



“I support an entire village. If I can do the work he did, I should be paid equally.” She’d spent the night working up that argument.

He glowered. Bell thought it was more because he liked to have the upper hand. He was wealthy enough that a few pounds more or less should make little difference.

“I expect you to earn that sum, my lady. I have no obligation to pay someone who cannot perform their duties.” On that happy note, he swung around and walked out.

Bell smoothed out the anguished note her predecessor had attempted to write.

*I owe you too much to allow you to make the mistake of marrying a faint-hearted miss like Araminta. She suits me better than you. . .*

Ink and tears blotted the rest of the sentence.

AFTER A MORNING of checking mending bones and administering poultices and remedies for the usual winter maladies—while listening to his patients extol the virtues of his father at his age—Rain wished for nothing more than a round in the ring or a good romping ride across the fields.

His brothers-in-law made poor sparring partners, and it had started to snow.

The house was an uproar of his sisters demanding to depart immediately and the older children clamoring for sleds. Rain caught one of the small ones by the back of his wool coat before he could plunge out the front door ahead of his harried nanny.

He lifted up his nephew until they were face to face. “Behave.”

The boy crinkled up his small nose. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, *my lord*,” the nanny corrected in a whisper, taking the whelp once Rain lowered him to the ground again.

The child would only have to learn to say *your grace* in a few months or more, but Rain didn’t impart that depressing thought.

The strong foundation of education, training, and confidence

he'd always relied on was developing unhealthy cracks he couldn't reveal to his family. Rain was fairly certain he shouldn't even notice the cracks, except he was a bloody sensitive Malcolm—a heritage a man of authority needed to overcome.

His new *countess* steward arrived from the back of the house, looking like a ray of sunshine despite her dreary habit. She brightened at sight of the children, then turned wary upon seeing him. Curtsying and catching a runaway toddler in the same motion, she turned the bundle of pink in the right direction, then vanished into the breakfast room where the staff left hot tea and cold comestibles for those who skipped breakfast or couldn't wait for dinner.

Famished, Rain wanted to follow her, but he had to address the concerns of his sisters about the weather and the state of the roads and other mundane matters that reassured them that all was well. After the mob bustled out he escaped, only to find Lady Craigmores had quietly slipped away, back to her cubbyhole. He liked that about a woman, he told himself. He needed peace and silence.

He grabbed a plateful of meats, cheese, and bread and settled into his study to finish a paper while stillness reined, however briefly.

A column of figures in a neat hand awaited him, attached to a note in a simple copperplate script. *All wages have been paid, along with the annual bonus, and the cash box is reconciled to the journal.*

A mountain of tension melted away. He really hadn't wanted to believe that his cousin might steal from him, but the fear had been there. He hoped Davis had enough savings to treat Araminta with respect until they were married.

He jotted a note to his bankers and another to Lady Rutledge to give to her husband when he returned. That was not correspondence he'd have anyone else handle.

He still had to apply himself to the task of finding a bride, sooner rather than later. Not an easy assignment if they were about to be snowed in. He consulted his list for ones who might live in

York, which would at least be accessible by train, and grimaced at the familiar choices.

He'd rather find ways to keep his father alive.

Remembering he'd promised his new steward a key to the library, he checked his watch to see if he still had a little time, then strolled down to the library wing. His elderly librarian reluctantly surrendered one of his spare keys. The man had reason to fret over who had access to the immense chamber. Teddy had once managed to knock down an entire section of shelving, and Alicia had a tendency to leave books scattered all over the house, other people's houses, and occasionally, the stable.

"Tell the countess she must sign out the books she takes," the librarian insisted worriedly. "I'd rather they didn't leave the room at all."

"I'll tell her. If we can trust Lady Craigmores to pay wages, I think we can trust her to return books." He hoped. It wasn't as if he knew a great deal about her, except that he'd met her at an Ives' wedding and had found her odd and untouchable. And his Ives' relation had married her twin, so presumably the family was respectable—except for the stepfather. The Earl of Ives and Wystan had taken care of that minor problem.

Rain carried the key back to the steward's office, drawn by curiosity more than a need to deliver a key.

The lady sat with head bent over journals, a cup of tea steaming in the chilly air, and a heaping plate of sandwiches at her side. She didn't seem to have an eating problem. A few glowing coals heated the grate but were no defense against the freezing weather leaving icicles on the windowpane. Rain tossed more coals on the fire, bringing her head up in startlement.

As he'd noticed on other occasions, the little color she possessed drained from her cheeks, and she swayed. The chair threatened to wheel backward, until she caught herself on the desk. As she composed herself, Rain observed old ledgers had been stacked under the desk to rest her feet on.

Then she took a deep breath that drew his gaze to delectable curves, and it was only her silence that brought his eyes back to her frown.

“Coal is expensive, my lord,” she reminded him.

“I own coal mines, my lady,” he drawled in mockery. “And if you catch pneumonia in this cave, I lack my father’s healing skills to aid your recovery. I don’t have time for you to be ill.”

She almost managed a smile. “I grew up in Inverness, my lord. I am seldom ill, certainly not from cold weather. Although I am considering asking for lined draperies for the window. It’s a lovely view but my back is to it, and the wind rattles the panes.”

“That’s a worthy expenditure that will reduce the immense waste of coal.” He knew she didn’t deserve his sarcasm, but he had to treat her like a man or she’d turn his head. “I’ll have the carpenter saw off the chair legs to a better height.”

“Only after you decide I will suit,” she countered with a hint of her own mockery. “Although eliminating the wheels might be simpler.”

Remembering why he was here, he set the key on the desk. “The librarian wants you to sign out any books you remove. He’d really rather you brought down your pillow and slept with them in the library instead of taking them out, but I vetoed that suggestion some years ago.”

She did smile then. “If you have a family of readers, that could have led to some interesting slumber parties.”

Rain shuddered. “No, thank you. My sisters rattle half the night as it is.” He nodded at her plate of sandwiches. “You are entitled to take time to eat. You needn’t work at your desk all day.”

“I’d rather work at my desk, thank you. I find numbers peaceful. If you knew how much I learn about you and your habits just by reading the numbers, you’d send me packing.”

“If all you wish to know about me is how much wine I drink and my taste for fish instead of fowl, then I’m not particularly concerned. I need to return to my office. You should leave yours a

little early if you work through meals like this.”

“I think I should like to watch the children play instead. I noticed they can be seen from the conservatory. If you don’t mind?”

“That’s an excellent notion. You might even thaw out since the gardeners keep it warm. I’m going that direction. I’ll escort you. Take your tea tray. There is a table there.”

Rain knew he was off his head to pay attention to a woman who heard ghosts and kept his books, but she was a lady, he was a gentleman, and habit was ingrained. It took every ounce of concentration not to remove the tray from her hands.

Today she wore a dowdy gray gown with none of the frills and furbelows and artificial protuberances that fashion demanded. She almost looked like a servant with only a single skirt and petticoat. The realization that she wasn’t wearing an acre of underpinnings caused him to step back and admire her sway as she proceeded him down the corridor. He was fairly certain if she wore a corset, it wasn’t a rigid one.

He did not dally with the servants, he reminded himself fiercely.

But as he held the door open for her, the fresh scent of rosemary and proximity of feminine charms left him aroused and wanting a great deal more than her company.

She set her tray down on the wrought iron table and smiled at him dismissively. “Thank you, my lord. This is perfect. You should hurry back to your patients.”

A snowball smacked a glass pane, and she dropped like a rock.

BELL WOKE UP ON A CUSHIONED, wrought iron lounge with snow beating against the window panes and the most gorgeous man in existence kneeling beside her, rubbing her wrist.

“Your pulse stopped,” he said accusingly.

Oh, right, she had a spirit in her head shouting *Save my son*. She rubbed her temple to dispel any trace of the nag. “I should ask the duke about his mother. She seems to be a very... forceful... presence.”

The marquess scowled and stood to tower over her. “Your heart stops beating and you have hallucinations.”

Refusing to be cowed, Bell swung her legs off the comfortable cushions. “No, I’m very sure I don’t. It would be lovely to explain away the spirits as a physical anomaly, but they’ve always been there. I’ve not died of heart failure. And a time or two, they’ve even been helpful.”

“One of these times, you won’t wake up.” He sounded furious.

“Well, there isn’t much I can do about it. I try not to be easily startled so they can’t invade. I seek quiet. But I cannot live in a tomb. May I speak to the duke about his mother?” Tugging her shawl around her, Bell took the chair at the tea table overlooking the children frolicking in the snow.

Rainford clenched his fists, even though his features were perfectly composed. “My grandmother was from Norway. She died when my father was only twelve or so. He can’t tell you anything. I’ll send a maid to sit with you.”

Norway? The woman in her head was Norwegian? That almost made sense. Living in Inverness, Bell’s family had accumulated a

great deal of Norse blood over the centuries. Like called to like?

She glared at him. "I'll not have a maid. As you see, I recover quickly. A maid is most likely to give me fits and starts with her chatter and squirming."

"Fits and starts! Is that what you call a serious medical condition? Perhaps if it's loud noises that startle you, you should stuff cotton in your ears!"

Bell knew he was being sarcastic, but she seriously considered the notion. "I can try that. I'm not sure it will muffle sound much, but it should be an amusing experiment. Don't you want to tell me to loosen my corset? That's the usual medical advice."

He clenched and unclenched his fists as if he'd throttle her. "You are naturally slender and have no need to tighten your corset. In fact, you need to eat more."

She bit into a sandwich and eyed him warily as she chewed. That seemed to calm him more than her perfectly rational verbal responses.

"You could be reacting to a lack of proper food. Did you eat breakfast?"

"I'm sure you have patients waiting for you, my lord. I'm not one of them. Go away. Let me enjoy my tea before it cools."

Perverse as she was, she actually enjoyed Rainford's attention. She hadn't had anyone fretting over her since her mother died nearly a decade ago. It was rather pleasant knowing a handsome lord was concerned about her welfare. But she was quite certain he had better things to do.

He found a blanket in a cabinet and threw it over her lap. "Stay warm. Eat. I'll check on you later."

She sighed in regret as he stalked out, spine stiff as if she'd offended him. The gentleman had shoulders wide enough to fill a doorway.

Basking in the warmth and greenery of the conservatory's unusually lovely and overgrown jungle, Bell nibbled at her food and watched the children play. She'd guess the eldest to be ten or

so, the youngest barely able to walk. Since she didn't dare have children of her own, it would be nice to watch these grow up—

If the marquess didn't fling her out on her ear, a very real possibility. She couldn't help the duke unless she knew more about him, and Rainford didn't seem eager to allow her to do so.

Surely his ghostly grandmother couldn't expect Bell to *heal* anyone. That was Rainford's—

Rainford had said he *wasn't* a Malcolm healer! So he couldn't heal his father. No wonder he was like a lion with a sore paw. And the spirit wished *Bell* to fix the situation? How?

She had better write the Malcolm librarians for advice—but she already had a niggling notion she'd rather ignore.

Iona had magnified her husband's Malcolm ability by *touching* him. Her twin had hinted that the marital bed had enhanced this gift even more.

When consulted, the librarians had told them there were other incidences of Malcolms uncovering latent gifts, all involving. . . physical. . . activities. Lydia had explained that some Malcolms were like tuning forks, emitting just the right vibrations to focus the energy of people receptive to their gift.

If there was any chance that the Librarian was right—Bell had to persuade the arrogant marquess to hold her hand while he attempted to heal his father.

*If* he had a healing gift. She might make a fool of herself for nothing and get herself thrown from the castle if he had no healing power. Still, she had to try.

RAINFORD WAS NEARLY GNASHING his teeth by the time he'd bandaged the last patient and sent them into the winter gloom. At least the snow had stopped.

He needed to search his medical journals for incidences of erratic heartbeats. He'd write Viscount Dare as well. His sister's



heart had been damaged by fever, but they found a solution. Perhaps he could send the countess to Dare's sanitarium—

The countess couldn't pay and wouldn't go. Perhaps it was a simple matter of diet and exercise. He'd consult with his father. The duke didn't have the strength for hands-on healing anymore, but he still had knowledge.

Plotting his course, Rain strode down the office corridor, half-afraid he'd find the countess dead on the floor.

He wasn't completely relieved when he found her wrapped in a heavy cloak and preparing to lock up with an armload of ledgers weighing her down. He removed the ledgers and flung them back on the desk. "They'll still be there tomorrow. You are to rest before dinner."

"I will go to the library before dinner," she said coolly. "I should like to meet your librarian and assure him that I will not abscond with his precious volumes."

Women were supposed to be pretty ornaments who nodded agreement when he told them what to do. As his guests, his sisters attempted to humor him by staying out of his way—as they always had. He returned the favor, and the house was happier for it.

But he had to consult with his steward regularly. Perhaps he should begin looking for a new—male—one.

He would have no molars left at all. "Since I have a book I need, I'll escort you there. And then to your room. If you do not stay there and rest, I'll have a footman follow you everywhere." He had some expectation of his *staff* following orders.

She stiffened and shot him a miffed glare. "Really, my lord, I cannot like this excessive interest. I'm merely a servant. You must have better use for your time."

"Riding herd on my siblings? Listening to my father's complaints? I'm sure I have no end of fascinating tasks. A trip to the library is the one I have chosen."

He had no idea why he was fretting over the damned woman, but he may as well have chosen a trip straight to hell as to escort

her anywhere. She turned up her pert little nose and froze him out in icy silence—a blessing in this household—as he led her down the long, drafty corridor to the library wing. Since the books didn't mind the cold and the upper story housed an empty ballroom, this wing wasn't heated to any great extent. The librarian had a grate in his office.

The countess huddled in her cloak as she greeted the crotchety old man and asked for an explanation of his filing procedures. Of course, she'd once worked for a librarian. She knew about catalogs and shelving.

Rain left her to the librarian while he hunted down the tomes he needed. Arms loaded, he waited for the lady to record the volumes she'd chosen, then escorted her back to the main part of the house. He didn't dare ask to carry her books for fear she'd bite off his nose. Or ear.

He'd noticed she'd removed several from the medical shelves. He'd have to go back and see which ones.

As they reached the marble entry stairs, he signaled a footman. "Carry Lady Craigmores books to her room and send up a maid with tea and a beef broth."

She tried to cut him dead with her topaz glare, but Rain was impervious to female wrath. "If you should sleep through dinner, I'll have the staff carry up a tray later."

"I think that very unlikely."

A door slammed, a child screeched in rage, and a cacophony of string instruments took up a somber refrain, almost to prove her correct.

"No wonder the opera singer stayed. The sound transmission in this entry is better than any theater." She marched off, leaving him with his load of books.

At least she'd deigned to speak with him. *To him.* Civilized conversation seemed unlikely. Generally, Rain preferred it that way. Women had nothing to say that he wanted to hear.

Although he had a niggling suspicion he might enjoy civilized

conversation with the countess. But he was long out of practice with exchanging more than formal inanities with the female sex. He didn't count his sisters among that number. Sisters were a different gender entirely.

Alicia flounced into his office, uninvited, as Rain set down his books on the desk.

"I wish to have a house party. A small one, with friends from York, perhaps. Perhaps we could plan a fete for charity. We can invite eligible bachelors and auction off dances. Teddy can sell some of his ugly paintings."

"You will not auction off dances. That's appalling." As soon as he said it, he knew he'd been manipulated. Before he could protest the house party as well, Alicia leapt into the gap.

"Fine, then. We'll discuss other means of raising funds for the poor. Or for hospitals. I'm not sure yet. I'll ask Mrs. Franklin to open up rooms for a party of forty, I think. Thank you!" She dashed out.

Rain reached for his barbells.

It was her house as well as his, he reminded himself as he shrugged out of his coat. Technically, the property was entailed to the duke. As eldest, and only, son, Rainford had been given full use of it once he'd reached his majority. The main ducal estate in Somerset was too ancient for modern entertaining, and the duke hadn't seen fit to improve it. So the family gathered here in Northumberland. They'd all been given their apartments upon marriage or coming of age—a family tradition Rain was disinclined to end.

He lifted the heavy weights over his head. He could remove himself and the duke to Somerset, but the journey would be difficult for a man in ill health. And the family really needed to be around him if these were his last months of life.

So a house party, it was. Perhaps Alicia would invite someone she might marry.

More likely, she was lining up females for him to choose from.

He pumped the weights harder.

Chatty misses just out of the nursery weren't exactly his cup of tea. Look at how badly his choice of Araminta had turned out—and she'd been one of the quiet, older ones. Given his heritage, though, he need a woman young enough to bear children until he had a son.

He set down the weights and reached for his medical books. Keeping his mind occupied helped. He began studying the root cause of fainting. It didn't take long to realize there was nothing new or useful in discussions of "blood humors" and certainly not in leeching. That was the last thing the woman needed. He should cull the library of this ancient rubbish.

Remembering a recent journal mentioning experiments with elevated blood pressure in patients with kidney disease, he turned to his shelves of medical journals to learn about blood pressure. He had no means of measuring it, and the countess seemed more anemic than ill—

Estelle rapped on his door and walked in without asking. She scowled at his dishabille. "A house party is just the thing. I'll stay and help Alicia plan. I know several widows who might suit better than her young friends. Shall I invite a few of your acquaintances as well?"

Most of his friends were married these days. "If you can think of any bachelors to match the widows, be my guest."

Once upon a time, she would have flung something at him. But his sister was a respectable married lady and mother now. She simply gave him one of those motherly disapproving glares, nodded, and stalked out.

Rain briefly contemplated kidnapping the countess, running off to Gretna Green, and hiding in her icy fortress in the frozen north. He liked the fantasy a little too much.

That was a problem. A wife who was unlikely to give him an heir would only postpone his current difficulty.

If only she were a widow interested in dalliance. . . The notion

was far too appealing.

He gave up on searching his journals, donned his coat, and headed up the stairs to visit his father. Perhaps the duke had some insight into fainting females, especially Malcolm ones.

Down the family guest corridor, Teddy stood outside the countess's door, imploring her to sit for him. "Only long enough for me to sketch," his cousin begged.

Rain turned that direction instead of following his intended path. She was right. Resting in this household wasn't likely.

Teddy was several inches shorter and a stone or two heavier than Rain. Rain grasped his cousin's collar and yanked him backward, unbalancing him. "The countess is resting."

"She is not," Teddy countered, shaking off Rain's grip. "She has told me to go to the devil and locked the door. That's not resting. I just need to explain—"

"If a lady tells you no, you go away. That's how it works." Rain shoved him toward the back stairs, in the direction of his studio.

Teddy staggered, then straightened and dusted himself off. "You are the one who doesn't understand. Just because you have no gift doesn't mean the rest of us are incompetent because we do. I have to capture her spirit. My Muse speaks to me through my work. She's trying to tell me something."

"She's trying to tell you to save the duke," the countess called from behind her door. "That's what my spirit is saying. If you wish to sketch me, you may do so over dinner, while I dine in the company of others."

"Thank you, my lady," Teddy called back. "I have never attempted public sketching, but with your permission, I will experiment." He happily toddled off.

Rainford took a deep breath and let his silence speak for him. He'd learned it was a very effective technique. His sisters couldn't resist questioning him.

Lady Craigmores could.

Fine, then, he'd leave her to rest. Except he knew she wasn't

resting, she was reading. He'd find out what later. For now, he'd visit the duke.

The duke was the one sleeping. At least it was quiet in here. Rain took the bedside chair and opened up a handwritten tome from the side table that he didn't recognize.

Inside was a compilation of herbal recipes to aid in various states of anemia and malnutrition, including nourishing broths for pregnant mothers—from the Malcolm midwife who'd just left. Rain recognized most of the recipes, but there were one or two—

The door opened and the countess entered, looking like a vision in a white and gold dinner gown that left enough of her bosom exposed to show she had a few freckles in places Rain really wanted to taste. He contemplated pounding the book against his head.

Instead of fleeing, as he expected, she hesitated. He stood and offered her the chair. Probably a mistake, but he couldn't change who he was. "You are supposed to be resting before preparing for dinner."

"I will rest here instead." She didn't smile but picked up the book he'd been reading. "Winifred said you might compare these to your own recipes."

"There are a few new ideas I could try, but I don't believe it is lack of nourishment that is his problem. Or it is, but the problem is that he is not absorbing what he eats."

She nodded. "He needs a cure that medical science has not yet discovered. I've been reading about how Malcolm healers have an *energy* that seems to reduce pain and promote healing. Would you be interested in experimenting?"

Rain's first inclination was a firm *Hell, no*. But that would require a lengthy explanation of all the times he'd tried and failed. Any healing he accomplished was through pure medical science, which was also failing in his father's case.

And then he noticed her hesitation. Lady Craigmores was not precisely a hesitant person. Quiet, yes, *hesitant*—most definitely

not.

“What do you suggest?” Intrigued, he kept his voice neutral.

“Holding my hand while you try to use your gift?”

## Eight

BELL WAS grateful the duke slept. That prevented his son from shouting his opinion of her inexcusable suggestion.

At least Rainford didn't glare and walk out at her presumption, as she'd expected. She didn't know how one went about asking a gentleman to hold hands, much less ask him to use a gift he may not have. It had been very bad of her.

"I have to try everything," she said quietly when he said nothing. "The voice is very insistent and anxious and won't leave me alone. Enhancing energy is the only ability I might have. It worked a little with Iona. Iona's gift seems to work better between her and her husband. Or it could just be Iona. I don't know."

That seemed to unbend him a little. "Ives is particularly thick-headed. I should think his bride would have had to slap him a few times before he grasped what she wanted of him."

Bell dared a small smile. "I think it was entirely accidental in their case. But Iona and I are twins, you see. If she can enhance his latent talent, perhaps I have the same ability. . . ?"

"Holding your hand cannot hurt. And if my father sleeps, then we won't raise his hopes too much. I don't know what you expect to happen, though." He lifted her hand and held it.

She liked the sensation of this connection with the marquess a little too much. He was warm, and his big hand was much tougher than hers. She stared at the hairs covering the back of it while he leaned over his father. Rainford was careful not to wake the duke and left the covers in place while he examined him. She wasn't certain that simply laying hands on the covers qualified as *healing*, but she was ignorant on the subject.



Still, the marquess humored her silly fantasy, which was more than she'd hoped. He must truly be desperate to save the duke.

She gripped his left hand as he passed his right one over the covers, presumably seeking. . . What did one seek in a healing process? It wasn't exactly a scientific method, so she supposed the marquess had no education other than what the duke might have taught him.

Beyond the warmth of physical contact, she felt no special heat or anything that might indicate he was having any success. When he shook his head and drew back his hand, she knew they'd failed.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I just thought we should try everything."

He nodded curtly. He had to be even more disappointed than she. She squeezed his hand in sympathy and dropped it.

She rose to leave, uncertain if Rainford's silence indicated anger as well as disappointment. She'd probably be angry in his place. It was very hard to have hopes dashed.

"Rest," he ordered as she slipped away.

She wouldn't, of course. She needed company to assuage her frustration. She'd really hoped she might make a difference—and stop this nag from invading her head. With all the spirits hovering just beyond the veil of the duke's room, she was amazed they weren't all clamoring for attention.

Without Winifred's accompaniment, Bell felt a trifle awkward entering the drawing room where the family gathered before dinner. She shouldn't have worried, she realized, when she arrived to find Alicia drawing up one of her lists, with a monkey perched on her shoulder. Teddy waited eagerly with a sketching pad, an elderly hound at his feet. The others entered in pairs, discussing their children and the day's hunting. Bell was simply one more face to bounce conversation against.

"Sit over here in the light, my lady," Teddy ordered, indicating a wing chair beneath a gas scone. "Dinner won't be for another half an hour. I can make a nice start."

“Behave yourself, Teddy,” Estelle warned, accepting a small glass of lemonade from a maid carrying a tray. “Rain needs a good steward more than you need a model.”

“You’re jealous that I haven’t asked you to sit for me.” He set up his easel and checked his pencils.

“You used to paint Estelle all the time,” Lady Delahey reminded him. “I have one of your sketches of her at home. Did you sell them all?”

“Back then—to her suitors, of course.” Teddy didn’t look the least fazed by the accusation. “My allowance wasn’t nearly enough to keep me in paint and canvas.”

“You won’t *sell* this sketch?” Bell asked, alarmed. “I do not wish my countenance on a stranger’s wall!”

“He’s hoping Rain will pay a pretty price for it.” Alicia sat back with her list and waved it at her older sisters. “Any names I should add or subtract?”

“Then you will be disappointed,” Bell told the artist. “I thought I was helping you connect with a spirit.”

“You are. You’ll see. It’s seldom helpful, mind you, but if I capture the phantom on paper, they sometimes go away. And sometimes the person sitting. . . It’s hard to explain. They make realizations or decisions as if the spirit is finally reaching them through the veil to give advice or warnings.”

Bell grimaced and attempted to sit still as instructed. She watched as the sisters and their spouses passed around Alicia’s house party list and made additions or subtractions. They knew a great many people. Bell knew none.

Or so she thought until Rain entered, snatched the guest list from Alicia, and perused it. He set it on the mantle, brought out a pencil, and crossed out the first one. “Cross-eyed and bad-tempered.” He continued working through the list with comments like, “Won’t leave her mother, likes to gamble, has the sense of a pea goose. . .”

He held off Alicia’s attack with one arm as he continued

through the list of unmarried ladies.

“There is nothing wrong with Miss Macleod,” his sister cried, smacking at his hand. “And Lady Emma is a lovely person and my friend.”

“Susan Macleod?” Bell asked. “About my age?”

Alicia turned to her eagerly. “Exactly, of the Malcolm Macleods. She is a bit of a bluestocking. . .”

“But a very sweet person,” Bell agreed. “I went to school with her. Who else is on that list that he’s so viciously maligning?”

Alicia snatched it away and handed it over. Her handwriting wasn’t wonderfully legible and even less so with pen scratching through it, but Bell managed to recognize one or two more names from her English boarding school. “Even if they are not eligible as marchionesses, they are very nice people, and would make a good addition to any guest list.”

“Ha!” Alicia glared at her brother. “At least someone recognizes good character.”

“Explain to my sister that good character is not the only thing a man wishes to find at his breakfast table.” The marquess poured himself a drink.

“That is extremely rude, Rainford. Go back to your playpen and let us manage the guests.” Lady Delahey hugged Alicia and they returned to the table to repair the list.

But Bell gathered the gist of his warning. He wasn’t interested in *bedding* any of those ladies. She didn’t dare tell Alicia that her brother had a very high opinion of himself. He was entitled to that opinion. The marquess was a striking man with a level of intelligence beyond most. Along with the power of his position and his wealth, he should be able to have any woman in the kingdom.

He’d look for one who would produce an heir, of a certainty. Had the list contained any Ives ladies? She didn’t know any except a few of the married ones.

Thankfully, the dinner bell rang.

Rain crossed the room to where Bell sat and offered his arm.

"Precedence, my lady." He glared at his sisters. "Alicia, you can go in with Teddy this evening."

"You should seat yourself among the men and leave the ladies to the other end of the table," Bell murmured as she took his arm and followed him to the dining room. "Your sisters are not about to leave you alone."

"They've always meddled," he said dismissively.

"They love you and want you to be happy," she corrected.

"Marriage will not necessarily make me happy."

"Agreed." She took her seat and said no more. Her mother's second marriage had made everyone miserable. Bell was still paying for that disaster.

RAIN SPENT the next week ignoring the house party preparations and trying to forget the mutual experiment in healing. The brief snowstorm and accompanying ice brought a series of broken bones to tend. He persuaded the duke to peruse all their volumes on anything that could be causing the countess's fainting spells. The list wasn't long and not particularly useful.

And he spent an agonizing hour or more composing a letter to Gerard, Earl of Ives and Wytan, inquiring how he and his wife had developed Gerard's new ability to see history on old stones.

If Rain were to hold Lady Craigmores's hand again, he wanted to have good reason. Perhaps it was proximity making him too aware of her, but he caught himself watching for the countess around every corner. That simply wouldn't do. She was just another petticoat and a totally unsuitable one at that. So he stayed busy.

He had the kitchen prepare tasty dishes for his father using the herbs and roots recommended in the receipt book. He arranged for those same concoctions to be available for the countess under the theory that any good nutritional food might help.

If she fainted again, she didn't do it in his presence. She did

leave useful comparison reports on his desk to reassure him that Davis had performed his duties to satisfaction.

The damned female had *agreed* with him when he'd said marriage wouldn't necessarily make him happy. Were women supposed to do that? Weren't they supposed to flaunt their wives and assure him that they were the ones who could make him very happy?

Did he want the countess to flaunt her wives? Rain had an uneasy suspicion that he did. And he was quite certain that she wouldn't. The one damned female in the kingdom who stirred his interest was the one he couldn't have and who didn't want him. He hadn't realized he was perverse. He'd always been the steady, level-headed member of the family. Someone had to be.

The night before the guests were to descend, Teddy declared his sketch of the countess complete and implored her—again—to let him paint her.

Rainford watched warily as the lady studied the sketch. He hid his relief when she shook her head.

"You are extremely talented, sir. And *gifted*. I do see the spirit, somewhat. She is like a dark shadow haunting the corner of the room. But I've had no revelation of how to do what she wants, if it is the same woman as the one in my head."

Rain strolled over to study the portrait. His cousin had sketched a lovely likeness of the countess peacefully holding a book in her lap, gazing into the distance—not dreamily, but with eyes wide open and a determined set to her jaw.

A halo of light centered her on the paper, but in the corner behind her, darkness lingered. Rain supposed he could imagine a phantom lingering there if he tried. "We have a portrait of our Norse grandmother in Somerset. Should I send for it?"

"Only if Teddy needs it." The lady shrugged delicately beneath her shawl. "The voice I hear comes with no face. She is growing more insistent, though, pushing at me even when I am not faint. Perhaps that's what the sketch was meant to do, bring her closer?"

Rainford was glad of the shawl concealing her charms. His sisters had done much too well with her wardrobe. Now he was hoping the shawl would fall to one side. . .

“If I could just paint you in oil—”

The countess shook her head emphatically, dislodging the shawl. She wore a flimsy scarf tucked into her fashionable bodice, but it didn’t conceal the shadow between her nicely rounded breasts.

“Do it from memory and that sketch,” she insisted. “I don’t advise bringing your oils down here, and I will not go to your studio.”

Rain thought he might encourage the argument in hopes that she might shake the scarf loose, but he had more self-control than his cousin. “We’ll have guests descending on the morrow. I’m sure Teddy will find new distractions among the widows.” He lifted an eyebrow at his disgruntled cousin. “Or you could court one of the younger misses. Take a lesson from me and don’t wait too late.”

His burly cousin shrugged. “I’m not ready for screaming brats yet. I ain’t the paternal sort.” He glanced at Lady Craigmores. “I might make an exception for present company.”

Rain resisted the urge to plow his fist into his cousin’s square jaw. Gut clenched, he waited for the lady’s response.

She merely looked amused, tapped Teddy’s cheek as if she were a hundred-year-old great-aunt, and Teddy, a mere whippersnapper. She left Teddy growling and joined the other women across the room.

“Some women can’t be flattered,” Rain said sympathetically, hiding his triumph.

Teddy returned his sketch to his easel. “She looks like a candy confection or a fairy princess with that pointy chin and those huge eyes, but the steel spine reaches all the way to her heart. Good choice for a steward, Cuz. If she decides the butler is stealing, she’ll throw him into a snowbank on his tiny bald head.”

Rain chuckled. “You haven’t seen her softer side. She didn’t

strangle the kitten who traipsed ink over her accounts. She merely carried the creature to the nursery and let the nannies punish the culprit.” Although Alicia had recently reported that the countess had another of her *spells* when Alicia had carried the squawking parrot into the conservatory while Lady Craigmores had been there. The lady hadn’t murdered them either.

Teddy snorted. “Soft, indeed. Marry her, and she’ll have us all stepping in line like good soldiers.”

“You exaggerate. I’ve never once heard the countess lift her voice the way the rest of you do.” Rain studied the portrait some more. She did have a very determined chin, even if it was small and pointed. It stuck out only a little, and had a dimple in it.

“Oh, no, she speaks low so we have to listen closely. I tell you, she’s a lion tamer, mark my words.” Teddy finished packing his pencils and marched out, carrying the sketch and easel with him.

Estelle approached from behind, startling Rain from his reverie. “I heard you received a missive from Lady Rutledge. Have Davis and Araminta been found?”

Rain sipped his whiskey. “They weren’t lost. They went straight to York and obtained a license. Seems the lady didn’t need to wait for her father’s permission after all.”

He should be insulted. He was rather relieved. He’d even asked his York solicitor to aid them.

“Will that harm their chances of a decent settlement?” Estelle asked in concern.

“I shouldn’t think so.” He’d written Rutledge explaining Davis was an honorable gentleman who had the sense to love a good woman. He hoped the platitude was true. “Besides, I offered him the same annual stipend I offered all of you. He’s a cousin, after all. It seemed fair.”

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. “You’re a good man under all that deadly scowling. Find a wife you enjoy bedding and forget all the rest.”

She walked off, no doubt to spread the word of what a generous

gentleman he was. Rain didn't feel generous.

He felt frustrated enough to follow his sister's suggestion, say to hell with heirs and protocol, and see if the countess would warm his bed.



THE PINNACLE of the house party was, of course, a “small fête” in the grandiose ballroom. Even the guests participated in decorating to some theme Bell assumed had to do with a winter wonderland, since barren sticks adorned with silver paper, gold glass birds, and silver and gold bows appeared in pots of greenery.

Bell noticed Alicia had a decided flair for persuasion. She talked her brother into allowing bidding on dance cards, with the ladies allowed to pay to remove any names they wished, in the interest of charity. The gentleman had to decide whether it was worth topping the lady’s bid to pay for another slot. The game had all the appeal of a horse race for the gambling addicts.

Bell was given the task of keeping track of the payments. She noticed Rainford didn’t participate—other than to foot the expense for the entire affair.

The ballroom wing was far enough from the duke’s chambers that the music shouldn’t disturb him. He only grumbled a little when told he didn’t need to attend, that it wasn’t a formal affair requiring his presence. Bell was growing fond of the older man—perhaps because the voice in her head grew quiet when she visited.

“What are you wearing this evening?” Alicia demanded as she entered Bell’s office. She set down the box of cash her guests had deposited in their war of affections. “I hope it’s the gold lace with the black and gold silk skirt. You’ll look very dashing and mysterious.”

Bell picked up the books she’d meant to spend reading in peace this evening. “I haven’t purchased a dance card. I thought I might stop a while and listen to the music, but I’m looking forward to a

quiet evening.”

“Every evening here is quiet!” Alicia protested. “You must come, if only to prevent Rain from abandoning my best friend in the middle of the dance floor. He’s utterly impossible!”

“I’m quite certain your brother can fend for himself. I imagine he’s been doing so since you were in the nursery. I have never seen him be rude to anyone.” She waited for Alicia to leave her small office so she could lock the door.

Alicia flounced into the hall but didn’t go farther. “He is abominably rude when he chooses to be. He’ll make excuses of business or patients or whatever pops into his head and escape. I swear, if he didn’t go through mistresses like water, I’d say he didn’t like women.”

Bell didn’t know whether to laugh or be shocked. “I’m fairly certain he likes women. What he doesn’t like is ladies. And you should apply yourself to your own love life before you try matchmaking for others. You need to know of what you speak.”

She knew when Rain *looked* at her. She was female enough to appreciate his male attention—and to appreciate that he didn’t act on it. She was an employee, after all. It would be extremely rude if he pushed himself at her as his cousin tried.

Alicia wrinkled up her nose and took some of the books Bell carried. “The gentlemen only talk of horses and gambling and treat me as if I’m an empty-headed doll, when they look at me at all. I think I prefer being a spinster. It’s not as if I need to marry.”

“Now stop and think about what you said and apply it to your brother.”

“No one thinks of Rain as empty headed!”

Bell remained silent, waiting for Alicia to work it out on her own.

“He is intelligent and handsome and wealthy and. . .” Her voice trailed off. “And titled, and they see him as a treasure chest who can provide their every desire. On the whole, they’re empty-headed dolls,” she added with a sigh of resignation.

“And he was willing to be the nonentity they require when he chose Araminta, simply out of duty. Now consider whether it is better for him, and presumably any wife he chooses, to be miserable for the rest of their lives, or for all of you to hope that Teddy will mature and not go too mad with the family fortune.”

Alicia sulked but didn’t argue the point. She returned to her original protest. “You still need to be there. You cannot bury yourself in books. What if there is a gentleman there who might make *you* happy?”

Given her weakness, Bell did not think that a possibility. But she had left Craigmores with the intent to experience more of life than she had, so she supposed she should attend. She did enjoy music.

“I’ll sit in the corner and watch for a while,” she agreed. “But the lace is far too grand. I am only the steward here, after all.”

“Oh, fie, you’re a countess. One as pig-headed as Rainford, admittedly. Perhaps titles go to one’s heads and makes your brains small. The gold is perfect. I’ll tell Rain to buy you a dance card or I’ll buy him one.”

Reaching the main block of the residence, Alicia handed the stack of books she carried to a footman and added the ones Bell carried. “I’ll send a maid to help you dress and fix your hair.”

That was how she ended up going to a ball.

Her hair was too short to dress the way the maid liked. Bell didn’t even offer up the net of hair she’d cut off for use in building a coiffure. She liked her hair short. It went with her small, forgettable face. The gown, as she’d predicted, was much too grand for someone of her size. She might be average height, but she wasn’t voluptuous and had little to show off in the way of curves.

But the blond lace over the gold silk was very pretty, and the ruffled black train was the most elegant thing she’d ever owned. She added her mother’s small string of pearls and deemed herself ready.

The maid insisted on tucking a gardenia from the conservatory

into the feathery confection she'd pinned to Bell's hair. The flower smelled delightful, so she agreed to that simple addition. Any more, and her scrawny neck would probably break trying to hold the thing up.

Bell was uncertain about appearing unaccompanied and wondered if she might slip in a back entrance. But when she peered out of her room to see if she could do so unnoticed, she discovered Teddy lounging against the wall, waiting for her. She almost didn't recognize him out of his messy painter's clothes.

He brightened at her appearance. "There you are! I thought perhaps you'd escaped and were hiding in the library. They won't give me a key to it anymore."

Bell laughed at his naughty boy grin.

In his elegantly tailored black suit, with his auburn beard and mustache neatly trimmed, he presented a handsome figure. It seemed unfair that the Winchester men had claimed all the good looks in the family. Sharp noses, square jaws, and high brows didn't work as well on women. She wondered if the Nordic grandmother had been the overriding influence in their looks.

Relieved not to have to appear on her own, Bell accepted his arm. "Do you cultivate carelessness or does it come naturally?"

He chuckled. "Rain's been telling tales, has he? I'll admit. I'm careless. My head never seems to be with the rest of me. But I clean up well, don't I?"

Bell laughed again. In these past years, she'd almost forgotten how. "How old are you exactly? Twelve? Perhaps Rain should set you loose on the world and see how you fare on your own. Then maybe your head would learn to stay on your neck."

"I'd rather have a woman take care of me. I'm fine in my studio. She can handle everything else. You're my perfect match," he declared solemnly. "And at the rate Rain is going, I'll have a very large fortune for you to manage."

"That's unkind and shows your lack of compassion. If you marry with that approach, your wife will kill you as soon as you

inherit. You might want to reconsider your plan.”

Teddy whistled in surprise at her bluntness, causing a few of the guests strolling down the corridor to glance in their direction. “Ouch. I offer you the opportunity to control the family fortune, and you suggest you’d kill me?”

“First, you did not ask me to marry. You made a rude suggestion. And secondly, I did not agree to be your wife, so my suggestion was more general. *Any* woman would want to kill you, unless you married a mouse.” Bell was starting to enjoy herself. She’d always wanted a brother, and Teddy treated her the same as he did his cousins. She felt free to respond in kind.

“I see I must frame my suggestions more carefully. I shall wait until I’ve danced you off your feet. . . Do you have a dance card? I don’t remember bidding on it.” His large presence and wide gestures provided a safe space in the crush heading to the ballroom.

“Alicia threatened to give me one, but I did not buy it and do not feel compelled to use it. I mean only to stay long enough to decide if the musicians are worth listening to.” Bell enjoyed the chatter of elegantly garbed guests as they entered the fantasy land Alicia and her guests had created. She’d met most of the company at dinner over the past days, so she did not feel too out of place.

And if she fainted for any reason, she had acres of petticoats and people to catch her.

“If Alicia is in control of your card, I completely agree with your decision to ignore it. She won’t have left space for me. I’ll take the supper waltz. After that, I’ll be comatose and of no use to anyone. I like my meals.”

“And your drink. If you really are interested in acquiring a wife to manage you, you had best control the drink. Managing women will certainly murder you if you become a drunkard.”

“Huh, no wonder Rain don’t marry. It’s damned difficult to please everyone. Marrying a mouse might prove beneficial.” He proudly covered her gloved hand with his own as they stepped into

the ballroom to be announced.

Standing at the head of the reception line, Rainford marked their approach with a frigid glare. “Toddle off, Teddy, I need to speak with Lady Craigmore.”

Rudely stepping out of the reception line, the marquess took Bell’s arm and all but dragged her into the ballroom.

PERFECT TIMING, Rain congratulated himself. The musicians were tuning up in preparation for the first dance and Alicia was occupied with a gaggle of her friends.

“Doesn’t Alicia have you set to lead the dancing with someone in particular?” The countess hurried to catch up with him.

He had seen her walk through the doorway looking like a golden fairy queen, complete with flowers in her hair, and he refused to let Teddy claim her. Bad of him, he knew, but Teddy knew how to charm and Rain didn’t.

The simpering misses he’d welcomed into the ballroom already had his gut clenching. He knew better than to fall for an enticing demeanor. All the rouge, flapping lashes, and revealing cleavage in the world could not turn his head. He didn’t know what it was that he looked for, but the countess had taught him that his dinner table needed sensible conversation.

“Alicia should learn she can’t control the entire household.” He dismissed his sister’s manipulations and signaled the musicians to hurry up.

“But you are no doubt disappointing some pretty young thing who might be the perfect bride. Now that you’ve insulted her—”

The fairy queen was a nag. Rain wondered what she’d do if he kissed her. “Do you know how to dance? Is that the reason you’re protesting?”

“I attended a few Hogmanay celebrations. I’m fairly certain reels don’t count in your estimation. The last time I danced a waltz

was in my one London season. I daresay I'll step all over your toes, but you won't mind because you've succeeded at what you want, correct?"

Rain didn't respond to her rhetorical remark. Of course he'd done what he'd wanted. It was one of the few prerogatives of his position. "Your last season was what, maybe two years ago? How old are you, anyway, that you call all those schoolroom misses *young things*?" Finally, the musicians struck a chord for a simple promenade where he could hold her hand a while longer.

If he didn't have to involve his father, he'd ask the countess to experiment with more handholding and healing. He stupidly wanted to believe a little magic would help.

"I turned twenty-four this past autumn," she said stiffly, watching the other dancers so she knew how to step. "But age does not reflect experience."

"I am thirty-four and a hundred years ahead of those misses in years *and* experience. Just follow me. You needn't worry about those pretty slippers. Is that gown another of Alicia's notions?"

She flashed him a golden glare that practically reflected the light in sunbeams. "I told Alicia you were never rude to people. Must I retract that statement? I can dance once I'm back in practice. I choose my own gowns. I have been running my own estate since infancy. Why do you pretend I am a toy to be displayed as an act of defiance against those who only wish the best for you?"

"Is that what I'm doing? I thought I was flattering a lovely lady and displaying her for a roomful of eligible young gentlemen to admire. Most women would be delighted." He was doing no such thing. He was spiting Teddy and Alicia and enjoying himself.

"I am beginning to see the family similarity to your sister and cousin." She relaxed in his arms a trifle.

"And you call me rude!" He truly was insulted. Teddy and Alicia were scatterbrains. "That was unfair. I bear no resemblance whatsoever to that pair."

“I don’t know your other sisters well enough to judge, but I suspect all of you are managing, manipulative, and accustomed to having your own way. I assume that also applies to the duke?”

Rain couldn’t decide if he wanted to dump the countess in the corner with his sisters or hang onto her for the rest of the evening. He couldn’t remember ever having a conversation like this, much less on a dance floor. “It’s the way of the world. Someone must lead.”

“And all of you have appointed yourselves leaders without regard to what others think? I am trying to learn how to be a countess, you see. And I’m thinking my tenants would lock me up before they’d accept my manipulating their lives as I pleased.”

“They work for you.” Rain glanced down at her in puzzlement. “They are supposed to do what you ask.”

“It is not really asking, is it? Not when we own the land and hold the purse strings. They either do as we say or leave. And since my tenants only know farming and have no other home, they can’t leave. I know far less about farming than they do, yet I’m supposed to lead?”

“Well, yes, there’s the flaw in allowing women to inherit—”

She released his hands and walked off in the middle of the dance floor.

Rain had no choice but to follow her. He wasn’t entirely certain if he wanted to catch up and strangle her or continue this very odd argument. What the devil was wrong with the woman?

Teddy was right there, handing her a glass of lemonade and laughing over some quip—probably angry—that she’d made—probably about Rain. He signaled a servant to bring the tray of champagne and snatched a glass as he approached. There were some advantages to being the damned marquess around here.

“Walking away from an argument is the reason women will never succeed in leadership.” Rain knew he stoked the coals, but he was enjoying the fire too much.

“A dance floor is no place for an argument,” she countered. “If



that is the sort of conversation you wish while others are anticipating pleasure, I can understand why you have difficulty finding a match.”

Rain hid his grin behind his glass when he replied. “I do not normally talk at all during a dance. I have very little to say to young misses, as you can see.”

The music plodded on. The dancers continued their foolish parade. Heads turned to watch them. Rain was fairly certain Alicia was glaring holes in his back about now.

“You must say nice things to the ladies, old man.” Teddy offered helpfully. “Tell them their hair is like spun gold and their eyes are the color of the moon at midnight, that way you don’t even have to figure out the color.”

“I did say nice things.” Rain gestured his glass at the lady, who looked as if she were prepared to escape. “She took them as a rude comment on her person and decision making, I believe. It is the countess who is out of practice at cloying sweetness.”

“You did not say *anything* flattering. You insinuated I would not dress properly without Alicia’s aid and that I could not deal with my estate because I am female. I do not *want* flattery,” she added hastily. “I am a mere employee and you have made a spectacle of me.”

“To be fair, my lady,” Teddy interrupted. “He showed the company that you are a countess, the next highest ranking title after his, since it is yours and not bestowed by marriage. If you had a dance card, the bids would be rising.”

Rain was denied the pleasure of her response when Estelle swept over, holding out the infamous dance cards.

“If Rain wishes to pay to blackball the other suitors on Lady Craigmores card, I think we can double or triple the bids. Your outrageous behavior, dear brother, has caused a clamor for the countess’s attention.”

Rain watched the angry pink fade from his steward’s cheeks. He suspected she was prepared to bolt. He couldn’t be certain of her

reason, but if he had to attend this damned entertainment, he wanted to do so with a sparring partner at his side.

He took the card Lady Estelle waved, tore it into shreds, and flung the bits into the air so all the shallow young cads could see. “Tell Alicia I’ll not deduct the cost of this affair from her proceeds if Lady C is allowed to choose her own partners. The young pups will have to ask properly.”

His reward was her expression of relief. Gratitude would be too much to expect. The lady wielded as much arrogance as he did—she simply hid it better.

“Fine then, I claim the supper dance!” Teddy crowed.

“Over my dead body, Cuz.” Rain bowed before the suddenly tongue-tied countess. “I hope you’ll reserve the supper dance for me, my lady. I’ve been told it will be a waltz and that you dance beautifully.”

Her expression was priceless. Her reply was not.

“I think Teddy might be right about his sketches.” Her voice shook a little. “There is a very ominous shadow in the corner to the left of the musician’s gallery. Perhaps someone should check on the duke.”

BELL COULD ALMOST FEEL the blood leaving her head as she fought the sensation of the dark shadow weeping. Rain offered his arm, and she accepted it, steadying herself without keeling over for a change.

Having spirits show up when she *wasn't* semi-conscious was very bad.

She didn't know if the men accepted her statement, but Lady Estelle appeared concerned.

"I'll look in on Father. We don't want to alarm the rest of the party. Rain, provide a distraction and dance with someone else, please. Bell, you should sit down."

Bell had never really given the sisters permission to use her name. They had simply done so and expected her to call them by their names as well. She preferred order and discipline to hold her challenging life together, but it was exceedingly hard to resist this uninhibited family—

As it was growing difficult to keep her distance from Rainford. Of all his family, he was the most restrained, but underneath that icy demeanor simmered a quiet intensity that could well take any direction if thwarted. She could feel his tension, his determination to protect his father, but he had a duty to the rest of his family as well.

The marquess nodded agreement and Estelle slipped away. Bell had no reason to believe he accepted her foolishness. He could simply be humoring his sister. But she desperately wanted to hope he listened.

"Teddy, be a decent chap for a change. Escort Lady Craigmore

to a quiet corner and fend off the dogs until she's recovered. I'll lead off the rest of the pack." Not waiting to see if his orders were followed, Rainford strode off in the direction of Alicia and her eligible young friends.

Unaccustomed to anyone watching after her, Bell wasn't exactly relieved by this command.

"You needn't mind me, Teddy." Now that she knew she wouldn't topple, Bell headed for a chair almost hidden by a riotous bough of bows with shimmering gold balls and delicate golden glass birds. "You should find a young widow to entertain."

He shrugged. "I don't need to woo a widow when Lady Pamela is available."

Bell sought for the name among the guests and vaguely recalled a languid lady in transparent gossamer who posed as an actress. Or perhaps the actress posed as a lady. Either way, it was apparent Teddy wasn't ready to hunt a bride.

He continued thoughtlessly. "Rain's right. If I leave you alone, the rabid dogs will descend. I'll stay here and growl at them. I'm a very good guard dog. When you're ready, I'll lead you back to my cousins. They'll talk your ear off, but they're not dangerous."

She began to feel a bit like a rabbit being coaxed into a cage. "In that case, give me your arm and let us stroll over to the offending corner. Perhaps there is no apparition but a loose drapery or some parlor trick."

"Don't usually work that way," he said gloomily, offering his arm. "It's why I prefer working here, where the haunts know me and have no interest in my subjects. If I go to someone else's home. . . I'll develop a bad reputation. Do you think I should paint Rain? Or the duke? Would that help the spirit speak to them?"

Well, at least Teddy believed her. "I have spent my life avoiding listening to spirits." Bell studied the dark corner they approached. "I am not a good source of information."

"Not sure that's a smart policy," he said worriedly as they reached the other side of the floor.

She could feel the icy chill as they stood beneath the musician's gallery. Lively music poured from overhead. Young couples leapt and jigged about the dance floor with merriment. This corner, however, was flooded with anxiety and fear. She had not encountered anything similar before.

"Well, can you tell anything?" Teddy asked.

"You don't feel it?" Was she hallucinating, as Rain had suggested?

Teddy shrugged uneasily. "It's a little cooler here. Probably a draft from outside. This wing isn't well heated."

Bell nodded, but privately, she didn't agree. "Let's join the ladies, then. They'll think we're up to no good over here."

Alicia seemed to be having a lovely time with her dance partner. Mrs. Lombard—Salina—was chatting with several other young mothers. Estelle hadn't returned. Victoria, Lady Delahey, was dancing with her husband while engaged in an active discussion that had them dodging other couples.

Bell almost wished she could be in a compatible partnership like theirs, but someone of her nature couldn't easily adapt to another person's habits.

A few gentlemen hovered around ladies Bell didn't know well. She had learned the names of the house guests but not spent much time with them. The older mothers and chaperones huddled together, gossiping about the prospects of the various young men. She didn't fit anywhere and really wanted to leave.

But Rain was out on the floor, gallantly playing the part of host for his sister's benefit. She couldn't dance with him once, then leave. Propriety demanded that she act as if she were interested in the company for a little while. Alicia had worked hard to bring this together. It wasn't as if Bell could heal the duke.

Her conscience whispered that she could at least listen to his mother.

Ignoring the whisper, Bell accepted the first gentleman who offered for the next dance. She did her best to remember the steps

and enjoy the music and the young man who danced so enthusiastically, even if he lacked skill. She deliberately looked anywhere else except the musician's corner.

She did notice when Estelle returned and the marquess slipped away. She tried not to worry. She danced the next set with a distinguished older man, joining a square with Teddy and the notorious Lady Pamela, who performed boredom superbly.

Rainford returned just as Teddy was demanding Bell's supper dance. Without a word, the marquess swept her onto the dance floor and imperiously gestured at the musicians. The onset of the waltz before everyone had found their partners caused mass confusion on the sidelines, but Rain swung Bell into the dance with a firm arm and step and pretended he didn't notice.

Perhaps he didn't. He seemed so lost in his thoughts that he didn't even speak. For a few minutes, Bell simply enjoyed the sensation of being expertly swept around the nearly empty dance floor as if she were thistle down. She dared say they appeared very dramatic, Rainford in his black and silver and her in black and gold. She didn't know how he kept the white and silver embroidered waistcoat so immaculate, but it sparkled like the glittery ornaments along the walls.

She sighed in exasperation as she realized what Alicia had contrived. "We match," she muttered.

That caught his attention. He finally glanced down at her instead of glowering over her shoulder. "What?"

"Alicia told me to wear the gold gown. Did she tell you to wear the silver waistcoat?"

"She told me it was a winter ball and this looked wintery." He swept her past other couples finally filling the floor and toward the edge where they could see the golden birds and silver boughs. "Gold and silver, I see. Wretched imp."

"We should be thankful she didn't ask for green. How is your father faring?" Now that she had his attention, she had to ask, even if it returned his blue gloom.

“He’s dying,” he said flatly. “Not tonight or tomorrow, but I can’t imagine he will last the winter. I’m not ready to lose him.”

That was frank. “I wish I could help.” Bell said it without thinking.

“He wants me to marry. He’s become obsessive about it. Help me choose a likely bride or marry me. Consult with my sisters, if you like. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make him comfortable.”

Startled, Bell missed a step. Rainford held her steady until she recovered.

For his father’s sake, the marquess was quite capable of cold-bloodedly picking a female, pointing at her, and saying, “You, marry me.” And most of the single women in here would curtsy and agree. Heaven help them all.

“I don’t know these people,” she protested. “Will they stay long enough for me to learn which ones are most likely to suit you?”

“No.” His expression was stony. “I am supposed to choose a bride after a few dances and brief conversations with chaperones present. That’s why I’d rather choose you. At least I know you’re not a spendthrift ninny.”

Bell almost laughed. “That was very romantic, thank you. But I am a fragile buffoon who faints if a door slams and who hears spirits in my empty head. I do not even dare lift an infant for fear its cry might startle me into dropping the poor creature. Besides, I enjoy my routines and require peace, which rules out your entire household. What about one of the widows? They’re older. Perhaps they have a little more experience in marriage and aren’t quite so silly?”

“I suppose experience counts, and I should start somewhere.” He studied her while abruptly swinging her in an unexpected circle. “Or I could find a way to heal your fainting. Is it just being startled that causes you to drop?”

Knowing he asked for his own benefit and not hers made it easier not to care about her one irrationality. For a brief moment,

Bell allowed herself to be transported by the lovely music, the glamorous couples waltzing around them, the glittering décor—and the handsome marquess actually *listening* to her.

Briefly, she relaxed in his arms, wishing she could sear this pleasure into her memory. Abruptly, Rainford tightened his embrace and swirled her in a tight spin.

Obviously, his mind wasn't on the beauty surrounding them.

"Swinging me about like a bell as you just did does not startle me." She laughed at his air of resolve, as if she were a scientific experiment he must study. "If the music abruptly shattered into cacophony, that might surprise me. I don't always faint, though. It's only when the spirits swoop in and batter at my mind. I cannot always fend them off. That's when I faint."

"Do you faint if you *allow* them in?" he asked in curiosity.

"I purposely don't allow them in, not since childhood." She wrinkled her nose at his disapproving glance. "Have you ever attended a séance? Listened to the silly women who wave their arms or talk in sonorous tones about the spirit of a long dead loved one wishing to speak with a man with an R in his name?"

"Good heavens, no. Do people actually believe that folly?" He looked rightfully appalled.

At least that was better than his earlier gloom. "Then you understand why I do not do that. Iona and I attended a few séances when we were in London. They were ludicrous, and made me uncomfortable, as if I were the charlatan. The people attending, though, were desperate souls. Their hunger for words from beyond was frightening. I am not opening up myself to that kind of notoriety."

Enlightenment lit his eyes. "You do not want people seeking you out in hopes you might speak to their long-dead loved ones. Understandable. The dead should be left to rest."

"Your grandmother disagrees," she countered dryly. "And if I let her speak, how soon will all the others wish to do so? I could spend the day conversing with ghosts instead of actually living."



He frowned. "Fainting and avoiding life is not necessarily preferable."

Well, there was that. Shaking her head, feeling her cap loosen, Bell discontinued the uncomfortable discussion. "May I visit your father while you entertain widows during the supper break? We really shouldn't encourage Alicia's fantasies."

"You won't return, will you?" He said it with accusation.

"I'd rather not. I'm tired and unused to these hours. I'd rather read and retire early."

"I'd rather join you." At her look of shock, Rainford smiled that lingering smile that made her heart beat a little too fast. "I thought I'd try to startle you into fainting so I could carry you away."

She laughed and left him in Alicia's hands when the dance ended.

AFTER THE LAST dance had faded into memory, Rainford checked on the duke again on his way back to his own chambers. His father slept. The footmen sitting with him shook his head, indicating no change. Lady Craigmores nagging hag might lurk like the specter of death, as she claimed, but his father's condition remained the same.

In his rooms, Rain ordered his valet to draw a bath. It had been a damned long day. He didn't have it in him to tackle weights or bags to work off his frustration. He hoped a hot soak might empty his skull sufficiently to allow him to sleep.

He climbed into the steaming water and let the heat penetrate. He just needed to pry the memory of the countess's lithe curves from every cell of his body. He'd had more than ample time to admire the way her golden eyes flashed, her pert nose wrinkled, and her wicked tongue lashed—and occasionally purred. Sitting at the dinner table with a lioness might keep him entertained.

At least her head wasn't empty. It was haunted, apparently.

Picking up the soap and washing, he almost chuckled as he recalled the way the lady refused to accept anything less than honesty. Once he quit placating her, she listened.

And then let him lead her in the dance, even when he held her inappropriately close enough to feel her breasts pressed into him. He could almost imagine her legs next to his. The supple sway of her hips aroused him just imagining—

He almost dropped his soap when he thought he saw her peering at him through the steam rising from the kettle on the fire.

Rain rubbed his eyes, but the wavering image didn't change. He squinted to better see the—apparition? His sisters would call it a spirit body, a projection of the soul. . .

Alarm pounded his pulse. He never saw spirits. That had to be steam and his own weariness conjuring. . . a vision of the countess in her virginal white night dress?

Even his tired mind wouldn't imagine his tantalizing steward in virginal linen. If he was asleep and dreaming, his brain had a lot to account for.

The specter shimmered there, looking vaguely bewildered. Rain soaped his chest. The image's eyes appeared to widen. Damn, if he was dreaming, he would wake up in dire need of relief. But the vision was so real, he sank lower in the tub, as if she could actually see his arousal.

*She was transparent.* This wasn't real. His mind must be reacting to stress and months without sexual release. But the image seemed so—riveted and appalled at the same time, that he could almost believe that was her reaction to his nudity.

He was losing his frigging mind if he believed that. He stood and reached for his robe. His jutting arousal wilted when the image grew pale and vanished at sight of him.

Had she fainted? Was she dead and a frightened ghost? Was his brain deteriorating as his father's body was?

Rain couldn't sleep without reassuring himself that the countess was alive and well. He pulled on his robe and a pair of drawers

against the evening drafts, then donned slippers. He had a master key if necessary.

Wide awake now, he stalked down his private wing toward the more public guest rooms where he'd installed his steward. If she stayed, he should offer her the cottage Davis had enjoyed. Rainford realized he'd been selfish in wanting her here, where she was at his beck and call. Maybe not entirely selfish—the lady shouldn't be abandoned to an empty house. She needed company, if only to prevent her from getting lost inside her head.

Half terrified of what he might find, Rain knocked quietly at her door. No reply. He knocked a little louder. Nothing. Panic dug in its claws.

If she was sleeping, and he was the one having hallucinations, he would simply back out again. With that resolution, he applied the key to the lock.

She'd let the bed curtains down to keep out drafts. Rain crossed the carpet and pulled one back.

In the glow of the small oil lamp on the bed table, the countess tossed restlessly. Her short blond curls fell loose about her face, and her linen gown revealed every tempting curve.

She was alive. He should back away—

Her eyes opened, and she beckoned with a shapely, bare arm. "You came! Thank you."

And with that, she sat up and caught his robe until Rain had to kneel one knee on the bed to prevent indecency. Which didn't matter a moment later when she kissed his chest just short of his collarbone and pushed the robe aside.

He didn't know what was happening here, but he disliked saying no to a beautiful woman.

## Eleven

BELL SURRENDERED to the delicious dream. She had never understood that the male form could be so stunning. . . and tempting. She'd only seen Rainford in strangling collars and cravats and layers of wool and linen. It was easy to read disapproval in his angelic countenance when he was so stern and formal.

But in his bath. . . He was all luscious human male.

She had no idea how she'd come to dream of him in his bath. Thinking wasn't part of the dream state. Now, in her head, he was magically here with her, and she let her dream self do those things she'd never consciously think. Having that big male body close had to be every woman's dream.

Her fantasy tasted of soap, his skin still damp from his ablutions. His chest was so broad that she could see nothing beyond those taut muscles, so she kissed him there. That felt safe. She pushed away the cloth disguising his shoulders—just how wide was he?

Astonishingly, a heavy hand pressed her back into her pillows, a real one? Before her sleep-confused brain could work this out, hot lips closed over hers, and the dream became one of longing and need. She'd learned to satisfy those urges on her own, but this. . .

Her overstimulated mind accepted this new dimension to her dream. She opened her mouth when his tongue pressed along the seam. The invasion of his tongue stole away her breath. She lifted into him, not certain whether to fight or succumb.

Her gown tautened across her breasts and a flick of pressure pinched an aroused nipple. She moaned with a rush of desire and

succumbed to the need to kiss back in the same hungry manner. She would devour him if she could.

She clutched at powerful arms when the brush of linen over her breasts became the rub of flesh against flesh. Electricity coursed from her nipples, through her middle, to the place where she needed to put her hands. . .

But a heavy weight held her hips to the bed and her hands only found muscle straining with tension and covered in linen when she reached his lower back. It was the oddest dream she'd ever experienced. Curiosity allowed her hands to return to the naked chest she'd seen in a bath and then—down his front. Men were made so differently. . .

A ragged curse tore from the mouth that had just begun to kiss her shoulder. An instant later, imprisoning arms rolled her over until she lay on top of—

*Lord Rainford!*

Startled from her dream, she couldn't fight the faintness.

The nag instantly invaded and cried—*Save my son! You have the power, use it! He will waste away unless you heal him. Fornicate. Let me enter your womb. I'll show you what to do.*

Instead of falling comatose, Bell responded to the desperation. She sat up, her legs spread open over male hips, her gown around her waist. Rain's. . . maleness. . . stirred of its own accord over her belly and the place that pulsed with need.

HEARING the countess speak in a strange voice, Rain strained not to touch her, not to lift supple, sweet-smelling thighs to where he pulsed with need and do just exactly as commanded. He didn't know whether the lady was awake, dreaming, or unconscious and speaking with the tongue of spirits. He had a horrible suspicion it was the latter.

He had never taken an unconscious woman, although the

compulsion was there, driven by that ragged frantic voice and his own desire and hope.

The primal desire to couple fueled a strong need to plant his seed as instructed. He was only inches away. . .

He clutched the sheets, not daring to remove the countess from temptation, for fear he would do the opposite. Instead, he waited in agony to see what she would do.

Her frozen stillness finally released him from the compulsion. Still not daring to touch, he yanked the blanket around her slender frame and rolled her back to the mattress. She moaned again, in that delicious manner that aroused him to the point of pain. If he kissed her again. . . would she wake and participate?

Not like this. He couldn't take her if she didn't know what she did.

He couldn't take her if this was all some pretense to trap him into vows, his cynical self added. That had happened often enough to keep him wary, even though he feared marriage was the last thing the lady wanted.

Steeling himself, Rain left the bed, wrapping his robe as best as he could over his arousal, hoping the cold drafts would relieve the ache of desire. He still couldn't tell if the countess slept or was unconscious. He wasn't entirely certain there was a difference, except she apparently spoke in tongues when she fainted—like the fake mediums she scorned. Did she talk in her sleep as well? No wonder she found marriage unappealing.

But he didn't think she found the marriage *bed* unappealing. She had responded with an unvirginal hunger to match his own.

Should he believe that voice had come from the spirit world? He shuddered a little at the message conveyed: *Save my son! You have the power, use it! He will waste away unless you heal him. Fornicate. Let me enter your womb. I'll show you what to do.*

Could a woman as quiet and proper as the countess actually say anything so raw? It went against all he knew of her. But to believe the alternative. . .

*You have the power.* . . Did that mean *Bell* had the power to heal his father? Did he even know whether it was his grandmother or mother speaking? Or someone entirely unrelated? But *waste away* certainly sounded like the duke.

Bell. . . as his sisters called her. . . stirred. He could hardly call her Lady Craigmore after this evening.

His tension was probably sufficient to wake every ghost in the castle. He could leave now and let them both believe this had been a dream.

He didn't.

The cold was doing its work, so when she opened her eyes, Rain was decently covered by robe and drawers. He held her curtains back so she could see him. She didn't react, just blinked sleepily. He tried not to do anything that would startle her but let her wake slowly. She had to be a magnificent actress if she faked this.

Finally, she struggled to sit up, gold ringlets sticking to her cheeks and brow, enhancing her fey appearance. He didn't offer to touch her but sat on the foot of the bed. She was so achingly beautiful like this, innocent and young and confused, without the shield of indifference and cynicism. He felt like an ogre doubting her.

"You are really real?" she whispered uncertainly.

Rain held out his hand. "Pinch me, if you like."

She took his hand instead, gripping it as if to steady herself. "I didn't dream you just now? You were really. . ."

"Kissing, you, yes. I enjoyed it very much until the nag intervened." Rain tried to note any flaws in her act, but he couldn't see anything except her confusion. He felt as uncertain as she looked. This was not ground his medical journals covered.

"I see." She shivered and drew the blanket up to her chin while she considered the implications. "Do you think Teddy's portrait gave her more power?"

That wasn't the direction of his thoughts, but he accepted it, for

now. "It seems that way. You appeared as an apparition in my bath, and I feared the worst."

"An apparition?" She shuddered slightly. "I've never done that before—that I know of, at least. I cannot know what happens when I'm unconscious." Releasing his hand, she drew her knees up to her chin and refused to look at him. "I'm not certain whether to be embarrassed or terrified."

Her steadiness in a moment that would have driven another woman to hysterics convinced him of her truth more than anything else. He very much appreciated her orderly mind. He had more than enough females in his life whipping him with their emotional outbursts.

If she'd been possessed by his grandmother, the countess had every right to run away, screaming. She might faint easily, but she wasn't a coward.

"A little of both seems natural. Do you recall what the spirit said?" Now he had to wonder if that had been his own hallucination because he'd wanted it so much.

She nodded but didn't repeat the words. "A little more explicit than her usual message but still not quite clear. I don't believe I want your nagging grandmother as a child."

He laughed. It was that or hold his head and bang it against the bedpost. "If that was her, she must have been a bit of a witch, more so than any Malcolm."

"A Norse witch?" she took the escape he offered and smiled a little. "But our Malcolm beliefs are similar. We accept that spirits are all around us, as natural as the air we breathe, and one might choose to inhabit us when a child forms."

He had to know. He felt like a schoolboy instead of a man with experience, but he had to ask. "She seems to think that to heal, we need to. . ." He couldn't talk to a maiden like that.

"Fornicate?" She finally glanced his way. Humor lurked in the depths of her eyes. "I'm not entirely certain that was an actual requirement or her impatience. Or perhaps our own wishes."



He breathed easier. "I love the way you think, thank you. If you'd had hysterics, I would be lost. You said you wrote your sister. Have you had an answer?" He'd not had one from Gerard, but the earl was a busy man with a lawyer's mind. He was probably considering all the ramifications of his bond with his wife and how much he would reveal and everything else a convoluted brain could evoke.

Bell shrugged. "Iona thinks it is only necessary that both their hands touch each other and the object of interest. Gerard is the one who is able to see the visions. She simply stimulates them. She thinks their. . . conjugal congress. . . may strengthen their bonds, but isn't certain that it actually makes the vision better."

"But as in all things Malcolm, the individual matters. With us, it may be different." Rain was pretty certain he wanted it to be different, that he wanted *conjugal congress* to be the solution.

She slanted him a look as if reading his mind. "We could tell the duke that we're experimenting. You could actually lay your hands on him. That's what Gerard does with his old rocks and artifacts. Then Iona covers his hand with hers."

"But you say Gerard and your twin have a *bond*. I don't think one waltz in a ballroom constitutes a bond."

"No." She rested her chin on her knees and stared past him. "I fear we are drawn to each other. I'm not at all certain that's a good thing."

"Shall we each write up a list of pros and cons?" He tried to be humorous, because what he wanted to say was *Marry me and let's find out*. Or simply *Let's fornicate*.

She actually nodded approval, the cold-blooded witch. Of course, he'd just been admiring her steadiness. He needed to make up his mind what he wanted, which had ever been the problem when it came to women.

"I think a list would be wise," she said. "I don't think our circumstances right now are conducive to clear thinking."

"I hope that means you still want to grab my robe and drag me

into bed.” There, if she could be blunt, so could he.

If she reddened, he couldn’t tell in the dim light. She did turn those glorious eyes in his direction at least.

“I will have difficulty sleeping,” she admitted. “That is still not reason to tempt fate.”

Some of the tension drained out of him that she felt the same as he. “There is a solution to our lack of sleep. Make certain you add that to your list.”

“Under pro or con?” she asked in amusement. “Go away, my lord. This is all highly improper, illogical, and inappropriate, and we will regret it in the morning.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Rain leaned over and kissed her lips, lightly, just enough so she knew he desired her.

She didn’t push him away but tasted him as if for the first time.

He stood then, before he could push for more. “Shall I visit your office around five tomorrow so we can compare lists?”

“Can we visit your father and try hands-on healing before we make any decisions?”

“I don’t want to raise his hopes,” he warned.

“He’s a Malcolm. He knows what you’re up against. Perhaps he can give us tips or talk about his mother.”

He dreaded the conversation but nodded. “Tomorrow then.”

BELL TRIED to bury herself in her work the next day, but the entire castle was abuzz with guests wandering about and women gossiping in every corner and Alicia popping in and out with final tallies on her dance cards.

They’d raised a nice sum for a York orphanage, and apparently some of Alicia’s matchmaking was deemed a success. Bell didn’t consider herself among them, even though the evening had ended with Rain in her chamber.

It was utterly impossible to consider pros and cons of what. . . ?

Marriage? Fornication? They hadn't been thinking clearly, that was obvious. She was amazed that they'd been thinking at all.

She'd had a nearly naked marquess in her bed. He'd come to her *willingly*. Rainford was a discriminating man. She was fairly certain he did not go to the bed of every woman who beckoned. Although his curiosity may have been as much of a driving force as her dubious charms. If a woman wanted to ensnare his interest, all she had to do was play mysterious and aloof and stir his curiosity—stupid females who didn't see that!

But they both wanted to heal his father, so there was a *pro* of some sort. Could they also learn to heal her fainting spells and be rid of the spirits in her head?

She pretty well knew she couldn't be rid of an innate gift. But if she didn't *faint*. . . She'd feel a lot better if *she* had control instead of every spirit who became bored and decided they had something to say.

Rain showed up precisely at five, looking as harassed as she felt. "We'll have supper sent to my father's room. We won't have to dress and entertain guests."

"Isn't that rude?" She closed the ledger she'd barely worked on.

"I'm a busy man. They know better than to expect me every evening. And I'd rather not punch out gentlemen salivating over you until we settle whatever this is between us. So let us play least in sight." He took her hand and slid it through the crook of his elbow. Taking the key from her, he locked her office door.

Between them? He felt as if there was something between them also? She wouldn't be female if she didn't respond to that notion with a quiver of delight. And she needed to suppress both notion and delight now.

"There is a nagging spirit between us, no more." Although even she knew better than that. Just holding his arm returned heated memories that she refused to acknowledge.

"Then you are even more innocent than I thought. I have the urge to drag you to the nearest bed and ravish you. I'm not

normally inclined to primitive urges, just as you are not normally inclined to float about in steam. There is something between us, even if it's not easily explained."

She'd hovered over his bath and watched him soap himself. She briefly closed her eyes in embarrassment. That really hadn't been a dream? No wonder he'd come to her room—to see if she were still alive and not another ghost haunting his castle walls.

"The evening was over-stimulating," she protested. "We were tired and worried and a spirit intervened."

"I will remained tired, worried, and overstimulated until I heal my father and have you in my bed. It is not a state conducive to reason." The elegant lord in his casual, but tailored, country tweed almost growled his displeasure. "Do you have your list?"

"I could not determine what pros and cons I was to list. But creating a child is probably high on my reasons not to marry."

"Especially with a Norwegian hag threatening us," he added ruefully. "There are ways to protect against conception. Although an heir is important in the scheme of things. Marriage only delays the necessity of handing over the trust. It doesn't remove the stipulation that I must produce an heir."

They were both Malcolms. She needn't remind him about Malcolms being unlikely to carry sons. "Another argument against the hag inhabiting me, then. She's not male."

He chuckled as he rapped on the duke's door.

No one answered.

## Twelve

RAIN KNEW the duke was supposed to have a servant with him at all times. He also knew his father was capable of scheming to send them away. But not answering his door if he was in there. . .

Perhaps he fell asleep. He pushed open the unlocked panel and peered in. The bed was unmade but empty. Dead men didn't walk. Still, he had to suppress panic as he gestured for Bell to remain in the hall while he entered.

He found his father in the parlor of his suite, sitting beside a crackling fire, wrapped in blankets, and perusing books. The duke appeared a little lost when Rain entered, but gestured for him to take the chair on the other side of the hearth.

"Where's your valet?" Rain demanded, not taking a seat. He wasn't a man given to strong emotions, so he had little experience in stifling the fear that had swept over him when his father hadn't answered the knock. And now he battled an unreasonable anger that he'd had to suffer panic because His Damned Grace hadn't felt like speaking.

"He's off preparing potions. Poor man needs company besides mine occasionally. Estelle tells me your new steward was seeing visions in the ballroom last night. Did she learn anything?"

His father's curiosity was as strong as his own. Rainford suppressed his anger before speaking. "Lady Craigmores is waiting outside now. She wants to know more about your mother." He saw the surprise on his father's lined visage but the wily old man simply gestured for him to bring in his guest.

With a degree of trepidation, Rain returned for Bell. "Perhaps the midwife's recipes are helping. He seems to be feeling better.

Estelle has told him about your vision in the ballroom and he's curious. Are you prepared to explain?"

"That I hallucinate?" she asked with wary humor. "Or do I play normal?"

"Be yourself," he ordered. "If we're doing this, we have to be honest with each other."

He hadn't realized how important that was until now. For most people, Rain played a part, just as she did. Society expected them to be stiff and formal to the extent that he was expected to call a wife Lady Rainford.

But he was a physician and couldn't tolerate society's hypocrisy in pretending men and women didn't have mentionable body parts. He despised the notion of someday losing all identity to become just His Grace or Duke. He couldn't treat patients like that. His family had never required that level of formality, but they were known eccentrics.

So he'd always dreaded marrying a lady he barely knew who would expect that formality. But now that he'd met Bell, he realized it didn't *have* to be that way. Only he didn't have time for searching for another improper female outside his exalted circles.

Despite her obvious trepidation, the quiet countess nodded, gripped his arm, and didn't hesitate to follow him through the bedchamber to his father's private parlor. Others might dismiss her as a vaporish female, but she had courage.

She dipped a curtsy and waited for his father to speak first.

"You have Norse blood as well, don't you?" The duke surprised them both.

"My family is from Inverness. One assumes through the ages of Nordic occupation, they mixed with the locals." A hint of humor laced her voice. "You think that is why your mother speaks to me? We have some common denominator?"

"I know nothing of spirits." He waved a frail hand dismissively. "Sit. Rain, quit hovering. Find a chair."

Rain assisted the countess to the chair by the fire and carried

over a desk chair to place between them. “Can you tell us more about my grandmother? Did she have. . . What is it that Lady Phoebe calls us? Psychic? It sounds better than weird. Other abilities?”

“Psychic—from the Greek? Of the soul, spirit, and mind?” The duke nodded. “Good word. You’ll understand that my mother died when Teddy’s father was born, when I was only twelve. She wasn’t a Malcolm, didn’t have our traditions, and left no journal.”

“You must have some memory of her.” Rain tried not to sound frustrated.

“She occasionally helped my father in the clinic. She spent more time in the nursery with my younger sisters than most mothers do, I believe. But I was sent off to school when I was eight. My impressions are from holidays at home. Earlier than that—those are hazy.” The duke puckered up his forehead in thought. “She did not strike me as a particularly spiritual woman. She tended to be blunt and pragmatic.”

Bell laughed a little, glanced at Rain for permission to speak, and added her piece. “If it is your mother speaking to me, she is extremely blunt and pragmatic. Conversation is not simple with someone who has been dead for fifty years or so, and asking questions does not seem to be possible. But if I’m understanding, she may have had some healing ability of her own?”

“Huh, hadn’t thought of that.” The duke looked from Bell to Rain. “What is it you’re thinking?”

Bell stepped in before Rain had to explain the impossible. “If you wish to believe I am possessed by the spirit of your mother—and I can certainly understand your doubts—she seems to be saying I must help Lord Rainford in healing you. It is the only interpretation I can make.”

“My interpretation is that the spirit knows how it is done and wishes to occupy Bell to do so. I do not wholly approve.” There, he’d said it. He could almost feel Bell bristle with objection.

“Hmph.” The duke studied them. “I have tried to train you in

how to do the things I learned from my father. He never mentioned a need for assistance.”

“Did he sometimes hold your hand as you did with me—to show how the energy feels?” Rain kept his voice neutral. He’d never felt a healing heat, with or without his father’s aid.

The duke puzzled over that a moment. “I suppose he did, when I was younger. We were seldom in the same place at the same time, mind you. I was in school and training. It was just a natural part of the examination to use our hands. The few times we worked together, he’d show me how to feel a tumor or close a wound or help a bone knit.”

“But it could be that he knew how to use *your* healing energy as he had his wife’s,” Bell said with excitement.

Rain wasn’t as enthused. “But I exhibit no healing ability and neither do you,” he reminded her.

“But I may have Iona’s *enhancing* ability. Perhaps I should work with the duke first, since he does have a gift?” She sounded as confused as he felt.

“Physician, heal thyself?” His father chuckled. “And you think I haven’t tried? Rain is simply trying to avoid marriage.”

Ha, here’s where he thwarted the old man. “Not so. I have asked the countess, but she has some notion that she’s useless. If we can prove that she can, indeed, aid in healing, then I may talk her into it.”

“Well played, both of you.” His father gestured his approval. “So, how much better must I be before you’ll both accept you’re good together?”

“Oh, we’re not good together,” Bell assured him. “Your son is too determined to have his own way. His way isn’t my way, so we argue. As an employee, I can obey his orders or leave. I do have my own estate, after all. Marriage would reduce me to his subject and ruin that freedom. But I do wish to help, if I can. I would do anything to have my own mother back, so I understand.”

Rain would argue, but that would only prove her point, so he



waited for his father's reaction. The old man was capable of feigning illness or health, depending on whether it got him what he wanted or not.

He began to understand Bell's complaint about his manipulative family. They came by it naturally.

The duke finally nodded. "Fine then. If I can delay dying, Rain will have more time to court you. What would you like me to do?"

"Be a patient and not my father and do as you're told," Rain said dryly. "And because there seems to be some question of a bond between the healer and the enhancer, I'd rather participate than watch the experiment."

With the old man's compliance, Rain arranged the stage. He had very little confidence that they would accomplish much, but he couldn't live with himself if he didn't try everything. He'd broken an arm as a youth. He knew how the healing energy felt when his father applied it. Unable to use his arm for sports or any other activity, he'd tried everything to heal himself faster, but he'd been forced to let nature take its course.

Perhaps he should advertise for a woman wise in the healing arts—and have every would-be witch in the kingdom on his doorstep.

"The assumption is that there is a blockage in the digestive system," Rain explained to Bell once they had the duke settled in his bed, on his back, still wearing his robe. "He is down to eating only foods suitable for infants. I have no evidence of tumors, cancerous or otherwise, although there may be one buried too deep to feel."

"I could feel them if they were there." The duke was starting to sound querulous. "Food simply makes me ill."

"I'll sedate you if you can't be quiet. I need Bell to concentrate on me while I focus on you."

As he'd been taught, Rain pressed his palm over the duke's abdomen, starting at the top, where the blockage would be more likely, if his understanding of the potential problem was correct.

Bell pressed one of her hands to his. They waited. Rain felt nothing. She added her other hand. Nothing.

They worked their way back and forth, slowly. All the organs appeared to be in their proper places and their proper sizes. Nothing felt different from his prior examination. No heat happened.

Even his father added his own healing hand. Nothing.

They'd failed.

The spirit remained silent.

RATHER THAN LINGERING to dine with the duke and his son, Bell took her supper in her room. Drowning in her own disappointment, she nearly cried for Rainford, who had to feel worse. The marquess wasn't a man accustomed to being denied what he wanted. But the one thing he wanted more than anything else—he couldn't have. He couldn't control or manipulate death.

She tried not to think too hard about his suggestion that the spirit had to *enter* her for the healing to work. The spirit hadn't been anywhere around when they'd visited the duke.

She didn't know how to summon a spirit and didn't want to. And she didn't want it inhabiting an unborn child, even if her mind wandered a little too far down the path of fornication with the marquess. Rainford's was not a warm and comforting personality, so it was only her animal lust appealing to her.

Being alone didn't help. She felt as if the spirit hovered like a malignant being, waiting for an opportunity to pounce.

So she tried to keep her mind occupied by writing to Malcolm libraries for any information they could find on spirits inhabiting people. Then she took the medical tomes back to the library. She now knew more than she had about the causes of fainting, without finding any solution. Medical science simply hadn't advanced far enough. Perhaps she could experiment with some of the herbs in

Winifred's tome.

Rainford was already in the library, working his way through more medical texts at the table where she usually left the books she'd finished.

They did their best to ignore each other—until doors started slamming in the distance.

Bell closed her eyes in despair. "I think that's how she means to catch our attention."

"Or Teddy has insulted another of his inamorata. I believe he's installed a new one in his studio." Carrying the book he'd been perusing, the marquess offered his arm. "Shall we see what we can do?"

"How?" she asked in exasperation, taking his arm anyway. "Do I stand on the stairs and yell at the nag? At Teddy? Is she using his emotional outbursts as a means of reaching through the veil?"

"I have no answers. For all I know, my father has figured out how to slam doors with his mind. Once you accept weird abilities, you have to believe anything."

Rainford's glance at her reminded her of the previous night, and she shivered. They had to believe she had somehow visited him in his bath while she dreamed, then spoke in the voice of his grandmother. That took a lot of faith and open-mindedness.

"For now, I'm believing in drafts a good carpenter can cure." He led the way down the long corridor and into the main part of the house.

From here, the sound of fisticuffs could be heard.

"What the. . . ?" Rain walked faster.

Bell lifted her simple office skirt and petticoat and hurried to keep up with him. The cries of women and shouts of men joined the grunts and punches of a brawl. The slamming doors slowed, as if the ghost had what she wanted by catching their attention. Bell wrinkled her nose at that prospect.

"Stay here." Rain dropped her hand and loped ahead to the grand marble entryway.

A ring of billowing skirts and black coats prevented Bell from seeing what was happening, but she could figure it out for herself. She'd grown up around men who didn't know how to express themselves except with fists. And then there had been her drunken stepfather. . .

Alicia stood to one side, fingers clenched and looking furious. Her sisters were trying to draw her from the fray. At Bell's approach, Alicia grabbed her hand. "Stop them, will you? Rain doesn't need to be breaking his hands on the curs."

No, he didn't, and yes, she could, but in front of all their guests? She had some experience with simple rural folk. Rain wouldn't appreciate her methods in his elegant home. Neither would the gentlemen apparently beating each other into pulps.

She hesitated long enough to see the marquess collar one of the young men and fling him backward. The combatant leapt back up and swung at Rain. The other tried to get through Rain to reach his opponent.

Bell gave them a few more moments to settle this without broken bones, but at the same time, she made her way to the large pot of exotic greenery cut from the conservatory. Alicia followed.

She was more accustomed to unbreakable pails of water. She risked fainting and smashing the pot on the stairs, but since she would probably break the ceramic for the cause, what difference did it make?

"Are you sure you want me to do this?" Bell asked as she hefted the vase.

Catching on quickly, Alicia helped her. It was really quite heavy. "I don't know what got into them. They were bickering over a card game, the doors started slamming, and they ran to find out why. And then there was pushing and shoving. . . I'll never marry. Men are quite ridiculous."

"I'm fairly certain your brother can crack both their heads, but I suppose their families might object." Carrying the pot up to the landing, Bell studied the action below. Rain was definitely holding

his own, but he was trying not to damage the guests—while they were definitely trying to damage him.

“Percy already has a broken nose. It won’t get any prettier.” Alicia helped her lift the pot to the railing. “Estelle, move the ladies back!”

That was all the warning they gave. Rain glanced up in time to step away in a manner that left the two combatants to dive at each other—directly in the path of the water and greenery that spilled in a cascade from the upturned pot.

Upturned palm fronds and gardenia branches slid down soaked frock coats and wilted collars.

With Alicia’s aid, Bell didn’t have to drop the pot. They gently set it on the floor.

The drenched gentleman glared upward. Alicia waved at them.

Rain grabbed their collars and shoved the soggy warriors into the hands of other male guests. “Take them down to the boxing ring. Let them kill each other out of sight of the ladies.”

“Boxing ring?” Bell inquired in surprise.

Alicia shrugged. “Rain can’t always escape his duties to ride, so he installed a gymnasium in the cellar. I think we frustrate him often.”

So that was how he managed to look like a Greek god. “I cannot think encouraging them to fight is a wise idea.”

“One can assume we’ve cooled them off, and they’ll use gloves.” Alicia made a moue of distaste. “I should look for men who prefer the library, I suppose.”

“Your brother apparently likes both. I don’t think that’s a qualifying factor. Do you think we can discover why they were fighting?” The fight and the now silent doors seemed a little too coincidental but Bell couldn’t determine cause or effect.

They descended to where the ladies were drifting back to the drawing room to hush the squawking parrot and screeching monkey, while the maids cleaned up the mess. Bell wanted to apologize for creating the extra work, but the maids were laughing

as if it were all a jest.

Rain had left with the gentlemen. The doors had stopped slamming. Bell touched Alicia's arm and kept her from joining the others. "I want to check on your father. Find out what precipitated the brawl and let me know, please? I don't know if it's important, but I feel as if your haunts are trying to tell us something."

"You should let us hold a séance," Alicia insisted.

As Bell trailed up the stairs, she wondered if Rain's sister wasn't right.

## Thirteen

“QUIT SNICKERING.” Lombard, Rain’s lawyerly brother-in-law, elbowed him. “Had Alicia dumped that pot by herself, you would have taken off her head. Admit it, you’re smitten by the countess.”

Recalling the image of his normally cautious steward and his baby sister slopping an entire urn of stinking flower water on a baron and a viscount, Rain struggled to keep a straight face. The inexperienced combatants circling the ring were still damp.

“I don’t know if smitten is the word.” Rain couldn’t help grinning. “That requires being hit. I don’t think the lady hits people, precisely.”

Lombard shot him a disgusted look. “Drunk with lust, perhaps? Ladies don’t *do* that. She shouldn’t be encouraging your sister to behave like a rag-mannered hooligan.”

“You didn’t notice, perchance, that Alicia was right there with Bell every step of the way? My sisters were born rag-mannered.” He didn’t mention Salina’s tendency to fling things when angered as a youth. Her husband was apparently under the illusion that his wife had been cured of her temper. “Had the pot been smaller, Alicia would have done it on her own. I suppose that means we’ve been going about this all wrong. Perhaps we should invite men who are a little less civilized to entertain her.”

Considering the train of proper young ladies who had been paraded before him, Rain thought he might understand Alicia a little better now. They had been taught propriety, but they’d also been taught to think for themselves. His other sisters had accepted their protected roles as ornaments, but Alicia was resisting—as he was. Cossetting a perfectly healthy female was an utter waste of his

valuable time.

When it came to marriage, honesty was a necessity, he decided. Pretending to be what one was not did not build a solid foundation for the future.

Lombard gave up and returned his attention to the ring where the two gentlemen were enthusiastically practicing their boxing moves. "They seem to have lost the urge to kill and maim."

"Do we have any idea what the argument is about?" Rain shook his head at an offer of a wager on the outcome. At least he'd provided the evening's before-dinner entertainment. He would have enjoyed pounding a few heads, but he was the host.

"Cards were mentioned, but I can't say if they're talking playing cards or dance cards or both. It wasn't as if I was paying attention."

Estelle's husband, Garland, joined them. "It started out with a card game, but the argument had more to do with the bidding on the dance cards, I believe. The red-headed bloke decided he'd been cheated out of a dance with Alicia and demanded the blond prig repay him for the lost opportunity. Words ensued."

"Is Alicia considering either of the cards?" Rainford remained skeptical.

"Can't say. You'll have to ask your sisters. They chatter on, but I don't pay much attention." Garland chomped on his cigar and watched the ginger wallop the blond.

Not paying attention to his sisters was dangerous, Rain could have told their husbands. But they had to know that by now. They weren't stupid men.

"I'm ready for dinner," Garland complained. "Can we throw water on them again?"

Rain snorted but sympathized. Once the blond was on the mat, Rain took command and stepped into the ring. "Go clean up for dinner, gentlemen. We're keeping the ladies waiting. If you wish to continue your argument later, the gymnasium is open for your use."



The combatants looked relieved to have the brawl ended. The ones posting wagers argued over the results, but fortunately, they were all ready to eat and didn't carry the complaints to open hostility.

As he dressed for dinner, Rain had to wonder if the current outbreak of anger meant the countess was correct and the spirits were fighting to be heard. It seemed far-fetched, but last night's other-worldly experience had almost made a believer of him. He might doubt the motives of most women, but Bell could not have conjured the vision he'd seen in his bath. Something weirder than usual was happening.

His first instinct was always to protect and defend his family. He needed to crush whatever enemy might harm them. But how did one crush a ghost? Should he send Bell away? Would that help?

He didn't want to send her away. Bell was a good steward. And Lombard was right, he lusted after her. Which meant he probably ought to send her away. That just didn't seem as satisfactory as potentially knocking a ghost to the ground and grinding his heel into its manifestation.

Alicia caught up with him as Rain descended the marble stairs after he'd dressed for dinner. "Don't do whatever it is you're thinking until you consult whoever you mean to maim."

Rain slanted her a dark look. "What the devil does that mean?"

"Everyone thinks you're expressionless, but I *know* that look." She lifted her silk skirt and hurried to keep up with him. "It's your off-with-their-heads look. Peter and Paul don't normally behave like that. They will apologize. I'll make certain of it. There is simply something *wrong* happening. You need to persuade Bell to hold a séance."

"Peter and Paul." Rain refrained from rolling his eyes. "I suppose there's a Mark, John, and Matthew about as well?"

"Quite possibly. I did not inquire as to all their given names. I've known Peter and Paul since infancy. That is irrelevant, and

you will not distract me from my point.” She caught his arm as they reached the bottom. “Bell *said* spirits hover when someone is dying. Father is dying. We all know it. What if they are trying to tell us something important?”

She may as well have slashed him with a sword. Rain clenched his jaw as he led her into the larger formal drawing room where the remains of the house party gathered. Several had left earlier, so the guest list was somewhat diminished. He scanned the room for Bell, but it would be just like her to hide after this afternoon’s pot-tossing episode.

“Bell does not wish to give a séance,” he murmured to Alicia. “I will not persuade her otherwise, understood? She does not like making a spectacle of herself.”

Of course, that was precisely what she had done this afternoon. Unusual.

“Hmmm, maybe we could disguise her. I’ll talk to Estelle.” Alicia abandoned him to rush off to her sisters.

Rain had a very bad feeling about this, but he had a horde to entertain, a dying father to attend, and a ghost to slay. Plus a woman he couldn’t have whom he wanted in his bed. His life was fun and jollies these days.

He noted several of the gentlemen hovering near the door, watching the stairs. Spitefully, Rain hoped Bell stayed in her rooms.

But, of course, she didn’t. She wouldn’t wish to make work for the servants, of whom she thought of herself as one. Damned woman. She descended in a perfectly respectable amber gown with few frills beyond a colorful shawl to keep off the drafts.

The young gallants jockeyed for her attention. She looked vaguely bemused, nodded politely to their comments, and aimed for the safety of his sisters.

Disgruntled, one of Rain’s friends poured himself a brandy and stood beside him. “If she’s holding herself out for you, Rainford, just say so, and we’ll back off.”

“She’s already told me in no uncertain terms that I’m manipulative and rude.” Rain swirled the brandy in his glass while he watched Bell sit quietly on a settee and listen to the parrots around her—the male ones, not the fowl ones belonging to his aunt.

“Well, you are that.” Harry sipped his drink and watched the ladies. “But I’m not. I offered flattery. I offered archery and books and talked flowers and a ride in the snow and. . .”

Rain glanced down at his friend’s fair head and snorted inelegantly. “She’s a Malcolm and values honesty. Since when have you ever been interested in archery, books, or flowers?”

“Well, since never, of course. But she’s a fetching thing, and my father’s been after me to settle down. She’s short, so she’ll fit well on my arm when we enter a room. I know you, so I’m not afraid of Malcolms. Good family to know, actually. And as I understand it, she has no interfering dowager or pater to breathe fire down my neck.”

“Well, that’s honesty.” Rainford chuckled. “I’m fairly certain she’ll be unimpressed. Why don’t you set your sights on one of the sweet young things eyeing us ravenously? They’re of good family, and some even have dowries. Lady Craigmores has only a barren estate in Inverness and is more interested in accounts than ballrooms.”

“Accounts? Women don’t do math. My sisters barely know the meaning of a shilling. Can you imagine discussing the value of a pound over the dinner table? Should I try?” Harry appeared intrigued.

Rainford contemplating telling his thick-headed friend that the countess was haunted, but she sat there looking so demure, serious, and interested in the talk of others, that he figured no one would believe him. Bell was entitled to her secrets.

“Try talking mathematics to the countess? Certainly, be my guest. Expand your conversational repertoire.”

Harry looked at him with suspicion. “You’re having me on. But

I'll try, just the same. Lord knows, it's tiring enough coming up with ways to compliment a woman's eyes."

"While pretending the flattered miss doesn't have a mole on her nose. I should imagine ladies must be equally weary of the foolishness, except for the very young ones. Or the silly ones," Rain added, although he didn't believe his sisters had invited silly women. Teddy's guests now. . . suited the non-marriage-minded bachelors well.

He gritted his teeth as Harry crossed the room to sit beside Bell. Rainford accepted that it was lust fixating his interest on his steward. He had no right to be jealous of her attentions—unless she agreed to be his mistress.

That would certainly put a damper on any relationship with any lady he wished to court. Out of respect, he'd deliberately surrendered his mistress when he'd begun courting Araminta.

He needed to beat up a punching bag.

BELL WAS aware of Rainford glowering in her direction. She was also aware of his reputation as an undemonstrative ice king, and that she was the only subject for his scowls. She actually basked in his attention. She'd developed all sorts of perversities since moving to Castle Yates—or perhaps the castle offered opportunities she'd never experienced before.

When the marquess's friend joined her on the settee to discuss investments, she almost laughed in delight. Rainford had sent the poor man to her. Sir Harrison was a pleasant man with a boyish round face and a superficial knowledge of finance superior to her own. She only understood pounds and shillings.

But she agreed with his statements, asked questions where she could, and he seemed pleased. She did need to learn intelligent conversation, she supposed, if she meant to dine frequently with this family.

It was only when a young widow stopped to speak with Rainford that Bell understood the fallacy of that particular dream for the future. Rainford must marry. His wife would not necessarily welcome her to his table.

She needed her own life.

Teddy entered the drawing room with his latest conquest, a wraith of a woman draped in gauzy shawls and filmy fabrics lacking appropriate undergarments. He steered her over to Bell.

"I've been telling Lady Pamela of your vision. She's interested in ghosts, says one has haunted her all her life, ain't that right, my dear?"

Bell recalled being told the woman was an actress, the daughter of a bankrupt earl, although the last part may have been exaggerated. But she'd been assured Lady Pamela was so famous that she was accepted in all drawing rooms.

"A weeping woman," the actress said in a faint voice that would never carry a theater. "It is most distressing. Sometimes, I weep with her."

"As one must," Bell murmured solemnly.

"You are so sympathetic, my lady! Those of us sensitive to the other side must weep for the long forgotten. Teddy, my dear, would you fetch me a small glass of wine?"

"You mean ratafia?" Teddy looked perplexed at the request. Ladies did not generally drink anything stronger before dinner.

His lady wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Champagne, Chablis, something French, preferably."

Hiding a smile, Bell rose. "I'll find some." Any excuse to escape. Teddy's artistic instincts did not lead to wise choices of companions.

She knew how to quietly order servants to do a guest's bidding. She might be unprepossessing. She might prefer sitting down for fear of keeling over. But she'd run her own estate for years. Guests were simple.

Glowering hosts, not so much. Even though Rainford was

working his way around the room, politely speaking with everyone—she could feel his gaze following her.

She arranged for the actress to have her wine. She encouraged a young man to speak with Alicia about music. She discussed child-rearing with Lady Estelle and a doleful widow, Lady Dalrymple, apparently another cousin.

And when the dinner bell rang, Rainford was at her side, offering his arm.

She refused his offer. “If you will not show attention to the ladies brought here for your perusal, then I must take my meal in my room.”

“You are the highest ranking female in the room. I am only being proper.” He appropriated her hand and placed it where he wanted.

“And when has propriety ruled your actions? Your sisters are entering with their husbands and will sit with their particular friends. No one else is standing on propriety.” She stopped near Lady Estelle’s chair when his sister waved at her.

“I do not wish to discuss fashion, gossip, and the price of eggs,” he retorted, dragging her onward. “You would think at least one bloody female would express concern for my father’s health.”

“That would be rude, as is your language.” Knowing he truly was hurting to speak so, she gave in and let him seat her at his side. “Such a question would be akin to asking how soon do you anticipate being a duke.”

He laughed curtly. “That was blunt.” He tasted the wine the footman offered and nodded approval. “I suppose you’re correct. I do not know any of these ladies well, and they do not know me.”

“If you made some effort, that could be remedied.” Bell sat primly with her hands in her lap as others were served. “You could have found one among the guests each night and conversed on subjects of mutual interest.”

Looking down on her, he wrinkled his long nose and spoke in an exaggerated drawl. “My dear Lady X, I had a patient today who

drank his mother's rubbing alcohol. He was only ten. It took two purges—"

Bell kicked him under the table. "My dear Lord Rainford, I paid ten invoices for grain and feed for your horses and wrote to York asking the current price of oats because your provider's prices are too high."

She beamed when he scowled. Perverse. She was indeed perverse.

"My feed provider's mother is ailing and his wife is expecting their sixth child. He knows I can afford to pay more for his oats. And why the devil are you paying accounts my agents should handle? You can't ride into the village to pay them!"

"Because one of your agents has an encyclopedic knowledge of fields and tenants but no mind for mathematics, and he's being cheated. The other has been helping him with his books, but he is apparently away visiting family over the holidays. Is this the kind of conversation you wish at your dinner table?"

"I can think of better." He turned his attention to the lady on his other side.

Undeterred by his curtness, Bell turned to the gentleman on her right. She remembered he had a coin collection he liked to talk about. Before she could ask about doubloons, a door slammed above.

The chandelier creaked into motion.

And in accompaniment of an enraged shriek, a silver platter of canapés flew from a footman's hands, landing on Teddy's head—and beard.

"I THINK it is time we discussed ghosts." Rainford attempted to keep his voice neutral as he led Bell down the wing reserved for female guests. Without clamping his roiling emotions into a modicum of control, he feared he might shout his fear—or worse yet, laugh inappropriately.

Teddy's expression as smoked salmon slid down his beard had turned terror into hysteria at the table. His guests had chosen to believe the shriek was no more than the swinging chandelier and the footman had been frightened into dropping the platter.

Rain knew his servants better than that. From Bell's pallor, Rain guessed she knew better as well.

"I will leave," she said in resignation. "I've never had a problem this. . ."

"Insane?" he suggested. "It's this house, I'm certain. My family is willful enough to reach beyond the veil. I do not blame you."

"I fear Teddy does. Although Alicia's hysteria was inappropriate. She had too much fun. And perhaps too much wine."

Rainford patted himself on the back for his restraint in not joining his sister in her delirium.

The countess continued. "It was very bad of her to suggest I instigated the incident to get even with Teddy for his bad taste in consorts. Even if it did divert your guests." Bell's fingers dug into Rain's arm, indicating the extent of her hurt, but her voice was as polite as usual.

They were both polite to a fault. Perhaps he *should* have laughed—to see if she might join him. "You must admit, my cousin



makes horrible choices, but my sister is simply bored and looking for trouble. The lot of them have tried for years to communicate with our ghosts. You are frustrating Alicia by having the talent and not using it.”

“And she thinks, like you, that I am depriving you of a chance to save your father. I understand. And no amount of assurance that spirits don’t know any more than the rest of us will convince you otherwise. Where, exactly, are you taking me?”

He gestured at the empty hallway. “I am attempting to be honest and direct with you and speak with you as if you were a man, except you’re not. Which means I need your help in making a few necessary decisions.”

She raised her light-colored eyebrows and waited without comment.

Rain unlocked a door at the end of the hall. He despised uncertainty. Ruthlessly, he chose to have this decision made now—but he had to do it with care or she’d run back to the far north. “My steward normally has the use of a large cottage in the village. It’s designed for a family man with wife and children, one who keeps a stable so he might ride over here daily.”

“I see. It sounds a little too large for me.”

“Exactly.” He opened the door and gestured for her to enter. Tonight, she wore a scent of lavender and a sweet scent all her own that had him salivating like a damned dog. He had to remain rational and not howl, but that required forgetting Bell’s kisses and exquisite curves. That was not within the realm of possibility.

“I have pondered the problem of how to accommodate your needs. I know you wished to use your salary to pay debts. A house would require servants and upkeep just as your manor does. Besides, I dislike the idea of you living alone or riding alone.”

“I rather like the idea of living alone,” she argued. “It would be peaceful, and I would not as likely stir the ghosts.”

*Of course*, she argued. It was what they did. Rain was unaccustomed to ladies disagreeing with him. His sisters had

grown up in Somerset. He'd gone to school and spent most of his vacations in York, learning the medical practice. He knew his sisters were argumentative, but he'd not had to deal with them to any extent until his father's illness. Their husbands had always acted as buffer if there was any minor disagreement.

But his new steward. . . He couldn't ignore Bell. Lust warred with impatience and concern. His molars would never survive, even though she spoke to him much as Davis once had, perhaps with a little less deference. The countess was more arrogant than his impoverished cousin.

And had a musical voice that could be singing lullabies for how little she raised it. Even her arguments aroused him. He'd always been a rational, responsible gentleman. She was turning him into a slaving animal. He needed a solution—soon.

"Nonetheless, you need servants," Rain insisted. "The castle has plenty. You can't afford them. And as you're aware, feeding a stable is costly. So I'm offering this suite in substitute. It's far from the family and should be quiet." He lit the sconces so she could see.

He could tell she was interested, perhaps more than interested. She drew her hand over the silver-blue of the sofa situated in front of a tiled fireplace. Darker blue wing chairs flanked the sofa. A Regency-era writing desk and bookshelves occupied one corner. The women in his family had good taste—and his money to waste.

Wooing with furniture. . . he'd have to take notes.

"There is a bedchamber and bathing chamber to the left." He gestured at a door painted with a mural of peacocks. "A second bedroom and a maid's room is on the right." That panel was painted with swans. "We once used this for visiting family. But my aunts are older now and prefer I visit them. And my cousins are grown. My sisters prefer their own apartments and the nursery for their infants. This sits vacant."

"This house is immense. You could sleep royalty here." She peered into the bedchamber on the left.

“Vicki isn’t likely to visit,” he said dryly. “The days of royal retinues needing suites are long gone, thank heavens. I’ve been told we have nearly five miles of corridors, but I’ve not attempted to measure. My family has always had architects eager to add their mark, like Teddy.”

“Five miles! I shall be able to exercise without leaving the house.” She wandered into the bedchamber, out of sight.

Rain raised his voice slightly, unwilling to watch her in juxtaposition with a bed unless he could act on it. “The only reason the suite is in good repair is that my sisters and aunts like decorating. Like Teddy’s studio, it has large windows. These overlook the rose gardens, I believe.”

“Modern fixtures,” she said admiringly from the washroom. “You could ensconce your favorite aunts in here when they grow old and feeble.”

Rainford snorted at the thought. “Keep in mind that the aunts on the paternal side who grew up here are Malcolms. They have huge families, as well as occupations that keep them busy. I assure you they do not need it.” Neither did his uncles by marriage, some of whom were Ives and would go berserk confined in this femininity.

She reappeared to cross the parlor to the maid’s room. “I’ve been sharing a maid with the other ladies. I don’t know what I would do with one all my own. But I’m sure one would love this charming space.”

“Once my sisters have gone home, we’ll have maids to spare. My sisters let their servants off for the holidays, knowing we have extra they can share. If you could see out the window at this hour, you’d realize this suite is at the very end of the north wing, directly over your office. You need only go down the back stairs to be there, if you don’t mind using the servants’ door. The guest stairs are back at the intersection with the main block of the house.”

She swirled around to confront him, her hands crossed in the folds of her dinner gown. “And what do you want in return for this

luxury?”

The incident last night had not vanished with daylight. Their uncanny attraction and kisses had to be on her mind as well as his. He'd not been able to think of anything else all day.

But his motives were. . . mostly. . . honorable. “I ask nothing. You requested a private space when you arrived. I considered Davis's cottage but concluded that would worry me enormously. I'd forgotten about this wing. It's so very far from the rest of the house that it's just not used. So I had the servants take a look. They deemed it habitable.”

She nodded but continued to watch him expectantly. “So you've found a compromise that works for both of us, thank you. But why bring me here now? It could have waited until your guests were gone and the staff a little less overworked.”

How did she manage to look so defiant and delectable at the same time? “Unless you have some idea of what is causing the odd activities below, I thought you might be more comfortable out of the way. In the interest of experimentation, I'd hoped we might see if the ghosts followed you.”

She looked rightfully wary but seemed to accept that. “Wise, thank you. I've never had a poltergeist follow me around, but your ghosts are persistent.”

“Poltergeist?” Relieved that he didn't have to explain himself more, at least this minute, Rainford followed the path of enlightenment.

“A fetch that can move objects, like the tray and the chandelier. I hadn't yet proved the slamming doors are supernatural, but after this evening, it seems your resident haunt has chosen to present herself. It would be nice to know if your grandmother is behind the activity or something else.” She crossed the parlor to look outside the windows.

He knew it was too dark to see, but like moth to flame, he followed her. “You think there might be others?”

She turned abruptly. “I do not *experiment* with haunts. I am not

fanciful, like your sisters. I am a practical person and prefer logic and order. Bookkeeping and ghosts don't correlate. I have read about manifestations, of course. One must study one's gift. My gift does not enlighten me as others do. It is singularly useless."

"Your ability to communicate with the supernatural is only useless if you do not use it." They'd reached the point where Rain had told his sister he refused to go. But after this evening, what choice did he have? If she could help his father. . .

Bell sighed and let the drapery fall back over the window. "I do not know how to hold a séance. I think it unwise to even try while you have guests. But I will talk with your sisters, if you wish. I do not mean to be intractable. I appreciate all you've done for me. I simply dislike disappointing you and your family—or worse yet, somehow harming them."

"Let my family make their own decisions. It is you who concerns me. If there is any chance that a spirit will cause you harm. . ." She was possibly endangering herself by volunteering to experiment for his father's sake. He did not know of a single woman so generous.

Rain couldn't bear it any longer. He took this courageous, unselfish woman in his arms, savored her soft curves, the scent of honey and lavender, the reality that was Bell. Not his steward, not Lady Craigmores, not the countess—just *Bell*, the woman he wanted beyond all reason.

She didn't protest his action but turned her face up to him, revealing an expression almost as desperate as his own. "This is what I need. I need *you*."

BELL FEARED a spirit had possessed her for her to say such a thing, but the words were truth. The marquess had steadfastly kept his distance, offered her heart's desire, requested nothing in return. . . And she'd felt his loneliness and hunger and despair. How could

she not respond with her own honesty?

His embrace broke through the armor of prim efficiency that had guarded her soft heart for so long. She needed distance to maintain her shield, but Rain destroyed any chance of that. His kiss, when it came, melted any further hope of saving herself.

She couldn't pretend this was a dream. Rainford's mouth on hers was hot and demanding, and she now knew exactly what he wanted. When she parted her lips to let him in, he crushed her so close, she could feel that part of him she'd seen in his bath. She'd read the books. She wasn't entirely innocent.

She was just unprepared. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she clung to him, desiring him, wanting what he wanted, knowing they couldn't have it.

Finally, she had to pull away and bury her face against his cravat, letting her tears stain its spotlessness.

He didn't press her. He stroked her back, held her close, and didn't protest her inconsistency. "I know," was all he said.

"You should find a new steward," she told him, burying the words in his chest. "This will never work."

"Let us take one day at a time. I think you were sent here for a reason. Let us explore that first. I don't want you to be uncomfortable. Shall I keep my distance?" His voice was hoarse and sounded as if it had been torn from the depths of hell.

She shook her head uncertainly. "Not if a bond between us is necessary to save your father. I know that's why we're here, that it is what you want even more than you want me. We are both in untenable positions."

"Don't ever believe I don't want you!" He kissed her hair. "But I refuse to take advantage of ghostly pressure or the circumstances. We need to think clearly about what is best."

Bell laughed ruefully. "Which is probably why neither of us will ever marry until we're old and gray."

He grimaced. "The price of responsibility, I fear. Perhaps we should just resign ourselves to Teddy holding the purse strings. We

could open the house to tours to pay the bills,” he added with unusual wryness.

“You have a sense of humor. You should display it more often.” She pushed away, wiping at her eyes.

“I’ve not had much need of it until now. You give me hope I didn’t have before, which makes it easier to laugh at myself.” He offered his handkerchief.

She wiped her eyes and gave him a watery smile in return. “Hope is rather pleasant, isn’t it? Until it is dashed, of course. I so want to help you and your father. I really want to believe my gift isn’t useless. But nothing I’ve read has told me how to speak to spirits who insist on invading my head. Other people simply see or hear ghosts. None speak of being possessed. It’s excruciatingly unsettling.”

“And startling, which isn’t good for your health, understood.” He offered his arm. “Let me take you back to your room. You may speak with my sisters when you are ready. Until then, we will pretend all is well and go about our business as usual.”

“Easy to say,” she muttered darkly, feeling his tension as well as her own the instant she took his arm.

“Teddy tells me I must flatter your eyes, tell you they’re like the moon on a starlit night or some such flummery. Harry thinks I should talk of roses and archery.” He locked the suite behind them. “What topic must we discuss to be easy?”

Bell chuckled and wiped at her eye. “Which maid will you assign me? I rather like the one with the protruding teeth. She tells me all the gossip and does not complain about my short hair.”

“Fine then, you shall have Button. And then do we discuss the price of oats? I would woo you with words, if I knew the right ones.”

“You know full well you needn’t woo me at all. You’d need to heal me and make me not a Malcolm. I don’t think you’re omnipotent, however. So let us talk of how we might listen to ghosts and heal your father, since they seem to think that’s at least

possible.”

Bell thought she'd just consented to marry him if she were whole. Since that wouldn't happen, she didn't worry about words said in the heat of the moment. Rainford had an entire family depending on his stability. She wouldn't wish him harm.

She'd simply leave when the improbable proved impossible, as it always did.



“MARRY HER, Rain. If you lose her, I’ll never forgive you.” Estelle flung her needlework at him. It fell ineffectively on Rain’s desk, scattering the papers he was signing.

Estelle was the spokesperson for his other sisters, probably because she had some talent for smelling untruths and evasions. He should be grateful all his sisters weren’t in here, nattering. But if he, not his father, now had the responsibility for them, he had to listen. It just sometimes took some translation.

“If you’re speaking of Lady Craigmores, she won’t have me. She says it is only delaying the inevitable, and I must find someone who can give me a son.” Rain hated explaining himself, but this was truly a family matter, not just his decision. “I thought you were here to ask for an increase in your allowance.”

“With another child coming, we must consider the expense of schooling. And if Teddy will be controlling the purse strings in the future, we need to do so now.” She dropped into the old leather chair facing his desk and pulled out a handkerchief to dab at her eyes.

“Not you, too?” He knew from experience that tears came with gestation, so he did not berate her for that ploy.

She nodded. “We are all healthy and produce prodigious amounts of children. You will, too, Rain. One might be a son.”

He had six nieces and two nephews. “I calculate my odds at one in four. I have five years after marriage to produce an heir. I know math is not your strong point, but I think even you see the problem.”

“Then empty the trust. Give the monies to us so there is nothing

left for Teddy to fritter.” She sounded as desperate as Rain felt.

“If that were an option, do you think I’d not have already done it? Go talk to your husband, Estelle. I’ve explained it to all of them. The trust is made up of investments that produce income meant to support the estates as well as family. If I sell them, the money must be reinvested inside the trust, not dispensed at will. I can direct where the income is spent, but I can’t increase expenditures unless the income from the investments increases.”

“Which is why you should have married a wealthy woman long ago. A wife’s dowry could support the estates.” She sniffled into her handkerchief. “I am not completely dense.”

Rain shrugged uncomfortably. “That would have only given Teddy more to waste in the long term.”

“What happens if we shoot Teddy?” Estelle rose, sounding more angry than tearful now.

“You go to jail. And a distant cousin we barely know inherits. I believe he lives in New York now. Your husband can support you, Estelle. You will not starve.”

She harrumphed and swept out.

Leaving him feeling like a cad.

Rain could hear the clamor of more guests departing. He’d deliberately not mentioned Bell’s acquiescence to the séance so his sisters wouldn’t rush all their guests into the cold. But the mysteriously swinging chandelier, flying trays, and shrieking had spooked several. He should make note of which were the more lily-livered ladies and choose among the more courageous who remained.

It was Bell the ghosts haunted, and she had given no hint of fleeing.

As if on cue, more doors slammed, accompanied by another ghastly shriek. Half the gentlemen in the castle were hunting the source of the shrieks. After they’d muffled the parrot and monkeys in the cellar, and the noise continued, they were convinced it had to do with chandelier chains. The servants were lowering the ones

in the dining room for cleaning, allowing his maintenance people to examine the hardware, just in case. Rain tried to count how many more fixtures there might be but couldn't. His family had a penchant for dramatic lighting.

Just as Rain settled in to read the invoices Bell had left for him to sign, another rap on his door intruded. Groaning, he decided to assume Bell had verified all these figures correctly and just sign off on them.

"Yes?" He put as much frost into his voice as he could to discourage lingering.

Franklin, his butler, entered. "Pardon, my lord, but Mr. Winchester has requested a stage in the drawing room for this evening's entertainment."

They had a makeshift platform for theatrical productions in the attics. Rain glared. "And?"

"The only place it can be set up is beneath the crystal chandelier your grandmother brought with her when she married the old duke."

Rain considered his large vocabulary of mostly unused epithets and bit his tongue, as always. His grandmother—the Norwegian witch—had brought a *chandelier* with her? "Can it be removed before this evening?"

"No, my lord, I fear not. It is old and must be taken apart in pieces."

It held candles, so they'd not used it for lighting in years, but Franklin would not be bothering him if it were not a challenge for the staff.

"Fine. I'll speak to Teddy. I doubt the chain on that antique is our problem, but there's no sense in tempting fate."

The butler nodded in relief. "My thought also, my lord, thank you."

Dropping crystal chandeliers on Teddy and his new lover might be entertaining, but Rain really didn't hate his cousin. Teddy had simply never learned responsibility, had no reason to learn, and his

temperament wasn't suited to learning.

If it didn't grate every nerve in his body, Rain would suggest that Bell marry Teddy. It would solve a great deal.

Except he didn't think Teddy would hand over his wife to Rain after the ceremony.

Maybe he *should* look into the distant cousin and murder Teddy.

He ought to head for the gymnasium and pound a bag a few rounds before visiting his cousin's lair, but he hadn't the time for it. Stepping out of his office, Rain kept a wary eye on the crowd gathering on and around the grand staircase. They appeared to be studying the enormous chandelier hanging two stories above. Did they intend to blow in tandem to see if the fixture swung?

He greeted his guests as he traversed the stairs but didn't stop to talk. At least there weren't operatic arguments echoing from the upper floor as he took the next flight up. And Alicia's musicales had apparently come to an end. There would be bloody awful silence in a few months, he feared.

Teddy's studio door was open, and furious voices rang down the hall as he approached. Rain sighed in exasperation. He hadn't realized painting was such a noisy business.

Before he could knock, what sounded like a shot rang out. A woman screeched. Alicia shouted. Rain threw himself at the studio door, flinging the door wide so it hit the wall, hoping to startle any assailant.

Garbed in an awful black rag, with her hair straggling about her shoulders, Alicia cast him a look of disgust. "We were just reaching the climax, Rainford! Now we must start all over."

Lying on the floor, looking dead, Teddy lifted his furry head. "Hey, old chap, I didn't think we were making too much clamor this time."

The actress of the flimsy gowns was in even flimsier attire this morning. She lowered the weapon she held, picked up a shawl to cover her considerable assets, and drifted to the roaring fire in the

grate.

Rain took a deep breath, pushed down his panic, and controlled his voice. "Franklin tells me you wish to set up a stage in the drawing room, but the only space that can accommodate it is under Grandmother's chandelier. We do not have time to ascertain its safety before this evening. You'll either need to postpone your theatrics or take them elsewhere."

"We can't postpone!" the actress wailed. "You promised me, Teddy! The guests will all be gone shortly. We need to do it before they leave."

"We need the chandelier." Alicia gave him a look of disdain. "The whole drama is based on the chandelier. It came to me clearly last night and is probably the most brilliant thing I've ever written."

"Then stage it in the dining room. They should have that fixture repaired by evening. Or construct a make-believe one and hold it in the music room. I don't care. I simply don't want chandeliers falling on people's heads." Rain watched as Teddy staggered to his feet, apparently healthy and unharmed. He might wish his cousin to Hades upon occasion, but he didn't wish him dead.

The problem was all his own and not Teddy's.

"Thanks for the warning, old fellow. I'll create the most masterful chandelier in existence out of canvas. Tell Franklin to set up the stage in the music room." Teddy ambled over to his collection of canvas rolls.

"I'll start deducting the cost of excess coal from your allowance if you insist on burning through it." Rain nodded at the flames meant to keep unclothed models, and actresses, from freezing, then walked out, frustrated and annoyed and with no way to release his tension.

He met Bell coming up the stairs.

"I heard screams. Is everyone all right?" she asked breathlessly, still carrying the books she must have been taking to her room.

"This evening's entertainment, I believe," he said dryly, taking

the books and gesturing for her to turn around and go back down. “How are you always in a place where the drama is happening? You heard Lady Rutledge when no one else did, if I remember correctly. I have an aunt with acute hearing but did not think that was your case.”

She pondered as they reached the guest floor. Maids and footmen scurried about, helping guests depart.

“I’ve never lived in a place this large. Hearing noise in Craigmores Manor was not surprising. Even the few months I lived in Calder Castle had very little in the way of . . . excitement. It’s much smaller, and a large part of it was library. So I can’t say that I noticed hearing anything unusual before coming here. Your aunt must have lost her mind living with this circus. But you’re correct, I think. Lady Rutledge wasn’t sobbing loudly. Your spirits simply carried her sorrow, I think.”

“And now? Aren’t you usually in your office at this hour, far from Teddy’s theater?”

Her expression was troubled. “Usually, except I had the urge to visit my new suite, perhaps carry some of my effects there.”

“So you traipsed all the way from the far wing to your chamber just to carry a few books back?” He stopped at her bedroom door.

“When you say it like that—”

The chandelier over the marble stairs began to swing and shriek.

FEARING Rain meant to make a mad dash to save his guests, Bell caught his strong arm and held him back. Intelligently, his guests and servants below fled the creaking fixture. “She’s angry and impatient and wants us to know it. I doubt a spirit has the kind of mechanical knowledge or focus to understand the damage the swinging might cause.”

“How do you know this?” Rain normally had a compellingly

composed voice that he seldom raised, but he sounded as close to angry as she'd ever heard.

"I wish I knew. I am sensitive enough to know spirits exist. But. . . this is different. I *feel* her sorrow and frustration." Bell supposed the spirit's pain may have drawn her from her office, but the sensation was too new to understand. "It could be that she simply takes advantage of my presence. Perhaps I should stay on the other end of the house."

It would be dreadfully lonely, but Bell couldn't bear to cause harm if it was her presence causing the ghost's reactions.

The chandelier groaned and swung wider. The household began to gather, upstairs and down, keeping a safe distance. Bell watched in horror, certain the beautiful piece with all its crystals would come tumbling down at any moment.

"All right," she whispered in resignation. "Let us hold a séance this evening, preferably somewhere far away from people and chandeliers."

Rain clasped the hand she held on his arm.

*The chandelier slowed its spinning.*

With that evidence, they had no other choice.

"I'll tell my sisters." Grimly, Rain released her hand. "I'll ask them to determine the safest place and let you know."

He set off like a man on a mission.

Bell wasn't entirely certain it was a relief that he believed her. Another man might have scoffed or ordered her to stay away. They could all pretend the house's foundations were the problem. She didn't think one person in a hundred would believe a ghost was threatening them because it wanted to talk to Bell.

Hearing a child crying, she glanced around to see if any of the ladies noticed. The children had governesses. The nursery was of no concern to her.

But no one else seemed to hear—just as no one had noticed Lady Rutledge crying. With a sigh, she returned the books to her room, then set out for the upper floor again.

As always, Bell clung tightly to the banister on the way up. She hoped she might throw herself forward if she felt vaporish, but stairs always made her uneasy. That was the disadvantage of her new rooms—stairs in an area where no one would find her if she fell. Charming.

She followed the long line of closed doors to the far end of the upper hall. Apparently, she should have taken the other staircase, but she hadn't wanted to cross paths with the swinging chandelier. How could she possibly have heard a child from that distance?

Now that she was close, she could hear children shouting and playing. They sounded happy enough.

She really did not want to go inside. She loved watching children, but they were loud and rambunctious and startled her much too easily. Fainting in front of a roomful of children. . . Perhaps she could just knock and ask a nursemaid about a crying child.

Balking at being so craven, she took a deep breath and opened the nursery doors. A wave of sound broke over her. A confusion of small bodies raced about with dolls and swords, shouting and screaming. One young boy wore a pirate kerchief over his hair and held a doll with a toy sword at its neck. Girls shrieked. Toddlers jumped and tumbled.

Despite the chaos, an unperturbed older woman who might be a governess approached. "I hope the noise is not bothering you, my lady. The children needed a little exercise after their studies."

Bell clung to the door knob for support. "No, they are fine. It is just. . . I thought I heard crying." She swallowed hard and listened. "I still hear her."

"That is most likely Drucilla, Lady Dalrymple's child. We do not know what to do with her. Her leg is crippled, and even though we've tried to accommodate her, she is always unhappy." The teacher looked truly upset.

"Lady Dalrymple?" Bell tried to place her among the many guests, but mostly, they were single ladies. She hadn't thought any



had children. One of the widows, perhaps. She seemed to recall a mouse of a woman at the dinner table.

“A cousin from the duke’s side,” the governess explained. “She was widowed before Drucilla was born. They’ve led a tragic life.”

Ah, definitely one of the widows vying for Rain’s attention. “May I meet Drucilla? I am not very good with children who run about, but perhaps—”

The governess looked most eager. “Would you? We are at wits’ end.”

Reluctantly, Bell followed her through the spacious chamber littered with small tables and chairs, rocking horses, and various treacherous toys left abandoned in every corner. One girl screamed and darted behind Bell’s skirt, catching the fabric as she hid from the marauding pirate. The governess sent the pair on their ways.

Bell hadn’t realized she was holding her breath until she let it out again.

“Drucilla prefers the bedroom. We left her with some picture books and a doll. I cannot imagine why we did not hear her crying.”

“I assume Drucilla is a Malcolm? We sometimes communicate with each other better than with others, although I would think all the Rainford children. . .” Bell gestured at the tow-headed rowdy lot.

The governess nodded. “They’re all related, yes, as am I, from a distant branch. I’m Philippa Malcolm Damon. You’re Lady Craigmores, aren’t you? I am usually with Lady Estelle, and she’s told me about you. We all have our different talents. Perhaps you’re more receptive than I am.”

To spirits, perhaps, not children, not to Bell’s knowledge.

They entered a room with a row of child-size cots. In a rocking chair in a corner by the grate, a little girl of about five sat with a doll in her lap, sobbing into the toy’s hair. She did not look up at their approach.

“Drucilla, this is Lady Craigmores. She heard you crying and

asked after you. Can you say, 'Hello, my lady?'"

The child sniffed, muttered something incomprehensible, and buried her face in the doll again.

"Let us talk alone a little while, Miss Damon. You have your hands full with the others."

The governess laughed easily. "They're good children, just full of energy. Let me know if you need anything."

After she left, Bell drew over a chair and looked through the books left on a table. "I cry when I'm lonely or sad or afraid. Can you tell me which you are?"

The child shook her head.

Acting on instinct more than any knowledge of how a child's mind worked, Bell found a fairy-tale book and opened it to the pictures. "I've never seen fairies, have you?"

Drucilla looked up warily to study the drawing of a lovely flying creature with gossamer wings. She shook her head.

Bell flipped the pages to see if there were any familiar stories. "I've not seen gnomes or witches, either." She pointed at an illustration of a frightened little boy and girl cowering from a black-hatted witch. "Not that kind of witch, anyway. I don't know any mean witches. I don't see any ghosts in here. Have you ever seen ghosts?"

Drucilla's eyes widened. "Mama says there's no such thing as a ghost."

*Oops.* Out of all the many Malcolm children running about, there had to be at least one sensitive to the mansion's anxious spirits, Bell supposed. Looks like she'd found her.

Hiding any reaction, Bell nodded and continued turning pages. "Very few people can see ghosts. They don't like to believe what they can't see. But I see them, so I know they're real."

That was a lie. Other than that dark shadow under the musician's gallery, she'd never seen one. But she knew they were real. She had an uneasy notion that one had sent her up here.

"You see ghosts?" the child asked in awe. "Do people laugh at

you?”

Bell shrugged. “Of course. Most of the time, I just don’t tell anyone. But sometimes, the spirit has something that needs to be said. It’s not easy knowing when to tell anyone.”

“They scare me.” Drucilla buried her face in the doll again.

“Would it help if you sat on my lap? Maybe we can talk to your ghost and make her go away?” Bell set the book aside.

“I can’t get up good.” The child sounded a bit angry about that.

Bell couldn’t see the damaged leg under the child’s long skirt and petticoat. She didn’t know how damaged it was, so she couldn’t encourage her to walk. “If you will allow me, I’ll pick you up. Has your Uncle Rainford looked at your leg?” She didn’t wait for permission but simply lifted the child from the rocker and sat down with her.

Drucilla shook her head again. “It got broke and can’t be fixed. I don’t care. I don’t want to play with those meanies anyway.”

Bell knew enough about children to realize they often said the exact opposite of what they meant in order to hide how they felt. She hugged the small creature in her lap and lifted the book. “We won’t worry about your leg for now. Let’s talk about the ghosts that make you scared. What do they do?” She pointed at the flying fairy. “Do they fly?”

“No, silly,” the child scoffed. “They float.” She turned the book pages and pointed at a magic genie on a carpet. “Like that. Except they got no rug. And no feet, I think.”

Interesting. Seeing a ghost was probably a lot scarier than hearing one. “My ghost sounds more scared than I am. What does yours look like?”

“There’s *lots* of ghosts,” she declared. “Lots and lots. The lady is angry. She makes doors slam, and I get yelled at.”

“Ah, yes, that’s a problem. She’s slamming doors everywhere. She’s very angry. I think it’s because she’s also sad, but she doesn’t talk to me in ways that I can understand. Does she talk to you?” Bell was terrified for the child but had utterly no idea what to do.

Drucilla shrugged again. "Mama says I'm supposed to play with children and not listen to things I make up in my head."

That was a trifle difficult for a child who couldn't even climb out of a chair. "It's hard to tell if we're making up things or hearing things, I know. But I'd like to see your ghosts sometime."

Bell tried to understand how to help the child, but she felt lost in this situation. "If I tell Miss Damon to send for me whenever a ghost makes you afraid, would you tell her when you see one? You don't have to tell anyone else. I think she'll understand. I work not too far from here, and I'd come just as soon as I could."

Drucilla pondered that while flipping pages of the book. "I guess so," she said reluctantly. "I don't like being scared."

"Neither do I, love." She squeezed the child again. "So maybe if we talk to the angry lady together, she'll go away."

She nodded a little stronger. "Mama says if we work together, things get done faster. I help with her yarn."

Then her mother wasn't a complete simpleton, thank heavens. "So we can help each other with our ghosts. I'd like that. I have to go back to work now, but I'll talk to Miss Damon. I'm Lady Craigmores. Promise you'll have Miss Damon send for me when you're scared?" Bell stood and set the child back in the chair so she could read her little face.

A serious child with a long blond braid, Drucilla frowned in thought. "All right. Can I just call you Lady? I don't remember all that rest so well."

"Lady C. You know your alphabet, don't you? Just ask for Lady C, and she'll know who I am." Leaving the child with the picture book, Bell went in search of Miss Damon.

With a graying braid wrapped around her head, in the somber clothes of a governess, Miss Damon approached the instant Bell entered the schoolroom.

"Drucilla *sees* ghosts." Bell spoke brusquely, not allowing anyone to question her or the child's ability. "I *hear* them. The next time she cries, ask if the ghost is bothering her and if you should

send for me, and then do, please. I want to help, if I can.”

“*Ghosts*, of course, my lady. She’s a very sensitive child.” Miss Damon clasped her hands. “Should I talk to Lady Dalrymple?”

“I will, immediately.” Bell swept out, hiding her anger at a mother who would ignore her child’s fears. A Malcolm shouldn’t do that.

Of course, a Malcolm shouldn’t hide from her *own* fears as Bell had all these years.

“YOU HAVE to attend my play, Rain. You *have* to,” Alicia cried. “I know the ghost is telling us something important!”

Rain rubbed his temple and wished his title and his responsibilities to Hades. “I’d prefer the old besom just speak her peace and be done.” He’d rather the haunt speak through Alicia’s play than inside Bell’s head, but he thought it unlikely.

“Maybe she will tonight. She communicated with Teddy, didn’t she?” Eager to be helpful, Alicia practically bounced up and down.

“I don’t think a shadow haunting a painting counts as communication.” Rain reached for one of his barbells and lifted it up and down beside his chair in vague hope that would speed Alicia from the room.

“Well, if the play doesn’t work any better, we’ll have the séance. Shall we hold it in Father’s rooms?”

“It will be late.” But the ducal suite would be the safest place for keeping out wandering guests and servants.

“We can be quiet. His sitting room is large, with plenty of chairs. Should I bring the spirit board?”

“Ask Lady Craigmores. I cannot imagine she’ll approve. She dislikes contrivance.” Or he thought she did. When it came right down to it, he knew more about how he felt than what she thought. He damned well needed more time. . .

Which had always been the problem. He liked to have thorough knowledge of a subject before making any decision. It wasn’t possible to have thorough knowledge of a woman—and he preferred them mysterious anyway. Probably because he wasn’t interested in marrying them. Forcing his jaw to unclench, he

changed the weight to his other hand.

Alicia bounced a delighted curtsy and fled, leaving Rain as angry with himself as he was with the *spirits* inhabiting his damned house.

He had hoped to hold the séance while Alicia and Teddy entertained the guests with their theatrics. His married sisters occasionally managed to be sensible. Alicia—not in a thousand years. But he couldn't reject her plea for him to watch her play. What if she actually had found a way to communicate with the ghost?

He was about to go up to his father when he sensed Bell's presence outside the door Alicia had not fully closed. It was as if Bell's perfumes were meant to soothe, or perhaps just knowing that it was her calmed him. Quiet, competent Bell wouldn't demand drama. He quit grinding his teeth, set down the weight, and came out from behind his desk.

"Come in," he called before she could knock.

She entered hesitantly, with a puzzled frown between her eyes. "I thought I should speak with you before I speak with Lady Dalrymple. Do you know much of her?"

As if he paid attention. . . But Bell wouldn't be here unless it was important. "Helen? Distant cousin on my father's side?" And then he winced, vaguely recalling her place on the family tree. "Her brother is probably in line to the title, but I'd have to look to be certain in what order. We're kin, but her family is from Dorset. We only see each other on rare occasions when we're both in London. I'm not sure why she accepted our invitation." Rain gestured for her to have a seat, but she shook her head.

"Tragically widowed, with one child?"

Rain nodded. "He was in India, gouging for gold like the rest of the East India Company. Elephant trampled him, I believe. Why? Is there something wrong?"

"Her daughter is about five and apparently sees ghosts. I believe she may be seeing your grandmother, but I couldn't pry too

much out of her. She says the ghost is slamming doors, hence my surmise.”

Rain leaned his hip against his desk and studied the countess’s worried expression. He was gradually learning her moods. “You’re concerned, why?”

“Well, for one, Drucilla is terrified and spends all her time weeping. And secondly, Lady Dalrymple apparently refuses to believe her, so the child has no one to whom she can turn.” Bell twisted her hands in her skirt.

Rain wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but she hadn’t given him that right. His primitive nature seldom warred with his intense discipline, but Bell. . . presented a challenge. She considered herself an *employee*. To keep her here, he needed to respect that designation, for a while.

He crossed his arms and resisted temptation. “Helen was a frail child. She was always considered an invalid and an oddity. I assume her intent is to protect her child from the same label. That’s difficult enough if the child can’t walk. Seeing ghosts. . .”

She nodded understanding. “I’m glad I spoke with you then. I was angry and wanted to throw my journals at her and ask why she hasn’t read up on her daughter’s gift.”

He lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you angry. You would most likely have just slammed a book on the table in front of her.”

Bell offered a small grin that warmed him all the way to his toes.

“Well, possibly, but it might have been next to a full teacup that would slosh in her lap. I was quite upset. Has she hired good doctors to look at Drucilla’s leg? Is there nothing to be done?”

Not certain that he was happy about having one more responsibility added to his already crammed schedule, Rain wrinkled his nose and tried to remember if he’d heard anything about the child. But he tended to shut out gossip. “She has relations in London, so I would assume they had access to excellent



medical care, but I've heard nothing. What happened to her?"

"I don't know. I've only been told she's crippled and cannot get about easily. I've not seen her walk. If it can be arranged, I think I'd like to move into my suite as soon as possible. It's closer to the nursery." She did not plead or ask but instructed, as no employee ever did.

Rain had no objection. He *wanted* her in that suite—where he could visit with no one knowing. He hadn't expected it to be this easy. "I thought you preferred to stay away from children."

She sighed. "I don't wish to harm them. That's not the same thing. But Drucilla is already hurting."

"I'll talk to the Franklins. If the maids have made up all the rooms, they might spare one to pack your trunk. It shouldn't be a moment's work for a footman to carry it over. Are you sure?"

She raised her chin so he could see the flash of fire in her eyes. "I am sure. I do not know what will happen at tonight's séance. I suggest we hold it in the suite to keep the ghost from disturbing anyone in the main house."

Damn, he'd wanted to keep her room hidden from his nosy siblings. But he also wanted to protect his father. "Alicia wants to hold it in the duke's sitting room. You think that too dangerous? Once you show my sisters your new living quarters, you'll never be rid of them," he warned.

"I didn't *feel* the ghost in the duke's rooms, and yes, I think it might be dangerous. The suite should be neutral territory, don't you think?"

"I can't say. I have to trust you to make that choice." He was trusting her with a great deal, and he couldn't even say why. It frustrated him not to be the one to crush the ghost, cure his father, and maintain order in his own damned household.

It irritated him worse that he could not save his father and must rely on the supernatural, but there the dichotomy loomed. His father used unnatural abilities to help heal his patients. Rain was simply angry he didn't have any of his own.

Bell touched his hand as if she understood. He longed to clasp her fingers with his. Instead, he kept his arms folded and waited.

“I don’t even trust myself,” she whispered. “So I follow the path of caution. The suite, after Alicia’s entertainment? Just your family?”

He nodded curtly, and she was gone, leaving the scent of summer lavender in his wintry office.

Later, when Rain entered the crowded, pre-dinner drawing room, his guests buzzed with excitement. Apparently the threat of ghosts and Alicia’s entertainment was sufficient to amuse a few dozen bored adults. Of course, in the case of his immediate family, it was a necessary distraction from the duke’s impending demise.

After consulting with his sisters concerning Drucilla’s lameness, Rainford deliberately went in search of Lady Dalrymple.

His distant cousin only resembled his family in the light color of her hair. Others might call Helen’s features delicate, but compared to his sisters, they were weak—small chin, short nose, watery blue eyes. She had some of the family height, but her frame was thin, if not half-starved.

Of course, he’d thought that of Bell when he’d first seen her, but apparently some women were made slight. He was a physician. He couldn’t stop judging physical appearances in medical terms.

She jerked nervously when he appeared at her side.

“Lady Dalrymple? My sisters tell me I am remiss in not asking after your daughter.” Giving his cousin time to recover, he shook hands with the two gentlemen in her company. “Alicia hopes everyone will be attending her debut theater performance this evening. I understand Lady Pamela is a superb actress.”

Lady Dalrymple tittered uneasily. “We are all looking forward to the evening. Thank you for asking after Drucilla. She is a nervous child. I asked Lady Estelle if we could impose on her staff’s goodwill by bringing her with me. I trust the child has not been any trouble?”

“No trouble at all, that I’m aware. My sister tells me the child’s

limb was injured in an accident and did not heal properly. Have you consulted a physician who works with bones? I can recommend several.”

“That is most generous, my lord.” The younger of the two gentlemen, Lawrence Nevins, spoke up. “But such an operation would be costly. Lady Dalrymple is a widow, living on a pension. Not everyone is privileged to have unlimited funds.”

Rainford smiled faintly. “Nose still out of joint from the fisticuffs, Lawrence? Or have you become an anarchist since your brother took the reins of the family fortune?”

Lady Dalrymple touched his coat sleeve. “Please, Lord Nevins was a friend of my husband’s. He’s simply being protective.”

Rain bowed politely to the lady. “And we are family. I fear I am not omniscient. Let me know if I can help. If I am busy and forget, ask my sisters. They will nag until I listen. Your daughter shouldn’t have to suffer.”

Nevins looked as if he’d like to plant him a facer, but Rain strolled away before tension could rise. Heirs to dukedoms did not engage in fisticuffs, more’s the pity. A round in the ring was exactly what he needed. Or a night in Bell’s bed, but the séance put a damper on that hope.

Rain had a good understanding of why many heirs ran wild. It was an utter bore being proper all the time. Fortunately, he had other pursuits to keep him busy, and it was his nature to maintain tight control over his thoughts and thus, his actions.

Estelle caught up with him before he could reach a friendlier group. “If you had a wife, she would have known all about Lady Dalrymple and Drucilla. I had no notion that you hadn’t heard.”

“Only a wife who cared about my family might have such information.” Rain gestured at the elegantly garbed females surreptitiously watching him from every corner. “How many of these would bother?”

Estelle grimaced. “I take your point. Even I didn’t tell you about Dru. I foolishly assumed you knew. But I live in Somerset and do

not normally see you every day. A wife would. . .” She glanced at the company. “Be more concerned for her own family,” she admitted with a sigh.

Unlike the countess, Rain realized. Bell noticed every detail brought to her attention, even a stranger’s child. He’d searched the room and not yet found her hiding place. “Where’s Bell?”

“She thought it best not to tempt our resident haunt by being present during Alicia’s theatrical. I assume she’s preparing for the séance instead.”

Bell wasn’t even married to him, but she put his family first. Rather than thinking of herself, she refused him because she might not bear a son in time to save his family fortune. Bell was the kind of mature, intelligent, caring woman he wished to marry.

If only he had his father’s healing ability. . . he might marry Bell. But even the duke couldn’t heal the Malcolm curse.

Rain patted his sister’s shoulder. Estelle was a strong woman, made for having babies, then bossing them around. “I’m old enough to take care of myself. You have your own family. Will it be safe for you and Salina to attend the séance? We wouldn’t want any harm to come to children not yet born.”

“Unless the hag decides to inhabit the unborn—who can’t speak—I think we’re safe. As I understand it, once a spirit chooses to be reborn, they lose themselves. She won’t want that.”

“The *hag*, nice way to speak of your grandmother.” Rain covered his fear with amusement. The *hag* had apparently thought inhabiting Bell’s womb no problem, but then, Bell spoke to spirits. Perhaps she could talk to unborn babes as well. “Just promise me you’ll leave the moment anything feels wrong.”

“Nothing ever happens. None of us are susceptible. We simply want to encourage Bell to try. I know you’ll be a good duke someday, Rain. I’m just not ready.” She hastily wiped at her eye.

“None of us are.” He squeezed her shoulder and continued on his way.

Dinner without Bell would be sawdust.

BELL DEARLY WISHED to watch Alicia's theatrical, but caution had ruled her life for good reason. Instead of joining everyone in the music room, she finished her dinner in her new suite, then climbed to the nursery floor to check on Drucilla.

Learning the child was fast asleep should have relieved her. Unfortunately, Bell feared that meant the resident ghost was downstairs, haunting Alicia.

She took the corner stairs down to the main family floor. The enclosing walls of this staircase made her feel a little more stable.

The music room was on the public floor below. By following the gallery overlooking the entryway, she found the place where she could hear voices carry the best. Was this how the ghost felt—above and beyond any participation in real life?

Amusing herself by imagining the duke's mother floating over him ever since her death, Bell listened for any sign of trouble. She could hear the actors emoting, although she didn't discern the words. The audience laughed politely a time or two. They clapped enthusiastically after a musical interlude.

She should probably go back and prepare her suite for the séance, but she had utterly no idea what one did to prepare.

The actors raised their voices in feigned anger. The audience emitted squeaks of surprise. A female voice shouted. Bell clenched her fingers and prayed that Rain would call a halt if anyone was likely to be hurt.

The chandelier over the stairs began to sway.

The subtle motion did not trigger her startle reaction. Instead, Bell clutched the railing with horror while she watched the crystals rattle. And then she thought she heard more chains creaking in the distance. The marble entryway was an echo chamber that carried sound too well.

Not feeling the anxiety that usually had her toppling over, she swallowed hard and tried to think what to do. Remembering there

was no fixture in the music room, she sighed in relief. The company should be safe. Should she alert the servants?

She heard men grumbling down the back hall. The smoking room didn't have a chandelier, did it? Then she remembered the antlers hanging over the billiard table.

The lady was growing more powerful if she reached the far north wing at the same time as the main residence.

Bell had been rather hoping her remote suite might be too far for the ghost to reach, but it was only a flight up from the billiard room.

*There was a small chandelier in the duke's sitting room.* Alarmed, she lifted her skirt, intending to check on him—

Frantic screams erupted in the music room, on top of popping sounds. Caught by surprise, she felt the familiar fog filling her head. . .

1001, 1000, 999, 998. . . Bell concentrated on counting backward until the fog dissipated. When she no longer felt in danger of toppling, she looked down again. No one raced screaming into the corridors.

She'd caught part of the rehearsal and knew they employed fake gunfire. Perhaps someone had just been startled—

A heavy thud, followed by more screams. But she was prepared this time and took deep breaths to resist the dizziness. Rain's voice shouted over the rest. Rain never raised his voice. Torn between the duke and the need to dash downstairs to see if anyone was harmed—Bell hesitated in uncertainty.

The chandelier swayed wider and creaked louder.

*Back stairs.* She dashed around the gallery and down the corridor to the intersection with the north wing. The duke's suite wasn't far from there. She could stop. . .

The very worried Miss Damon emerged from the stairwell before Bell could reach the duke. "Drucilla is sobbing as if her heart is breaking. I cannot make out a word she is saying."

Torn, needing to be three places at once, Bell wanted to add her

screams to those below.

But screaming wouldn't help. Praying she made the right choice, she hurried upstairs to the crying child who might hold the key to the evening's chaos.

## Seventeen

“GRAB THE CORNERS AND LIFT,” Rain shouted to the men he’d positioned around Teddy’s blamed canvas chandelier. It had been a marvel of a multi-layered kite more than a chandelier, and now it lay in a tangled web on top of Teddy, Alicia, and the hysterical actress.

As the wooden frame and layers of canvas rose, Rain ducked under it. He hadn’t dared send anyone else beneath the contraption, not to rescue his sister. He found the black rags she’d been wearing in a tangle of rope and sheets. She didn’t seem to be moving. He swore under his breath. He needed to verify nothing was broken before he dragged her out.

Using his back as brace, he held up the contraption until he could see. Alicia was face down on the floor but breathed, thank all the heavens. He murmured senseless words as he touched her neck and did a swift examination of her spine.

Grunting, she suddenly pushed up and flipped over. Wiping a loose strand of hair from her face, she glared. “Well, that was not what I’d hoped.”

“Better than two-hundred pounds of crystal.” He wanted to hug her, but he was not a demonstrative man. And he still had Teddy and the actress to locate. “Can you crawl out on your own?”

She glanced around and pointed to a man’s boots. “That should be Teddy. Lady Pamela ought to be. . .” She wrinkled her nose and peered under the folds of fabric. “Closer to the fireplace, I believe.”

The boots were already stirring.

“All the chandeliers are swinging,” someone shouted from beyond the contraption.



“Well, that ought to empty the house in the morning.” Grimly, Alicia began crawling beneath the edge Rain held up. “Maybe that’s the ghost’s intent.”

“Keep everyone in this room where it’s safe,” he ordered. “Tell the footmen to serve champagne.”

*Bell?* Where was Bell? There was a small chandelier in the sitting room of her suite. And in his father’s chambers! Panic seeped over his normal calm.

Taught since birth to give commands, Rain resorted to training now. “Have one of the servants run upstairs to check on Father and another to locate Bell.” The servants, at least, would use their sheltered stairwells, away from chandeliers.

“Aye, aye, captain.” Alicia slipped from beneath the canvas.

If any of the louts holding up the corners had the brains of a peahen, they’d be dismantling the contraption by now. Instead, Rain had to crawl over to be sure Teddy was conscious. Apparently, he was lying there, studying his failure, and not dead.

“I’ll leave, just as soon as I figure out how I failed,” Teddy grumbled when Rain raised the canvas over him.

“You’d have to figure out how a ghost sways all the chandeliers in the house at once. Help me lift this damned contraption and find Lady Pamela. She stopped shrieking, so she must be dead.” Rain could hope.

“If she’s not calling for the removal of my head, she’s probably dead,” Teddy agreed glumly, climbing up on all fours to lift the center of his contraption on his bulky back.

The action revealed Lady Pamela crumpled on the carpet, beating it with her fist and weeping. Rain wasn’t going near her. “Your turn, old boy. Go rescue the hysterical lady.”

“She’s having a tantrum. Can we just leave her under here?” Despite his words, Teddy began crawling over to comfort the victim of his incompetence.

“Your guest, not mine. I have an entire company to settle down.” Praying his cousin didn’t marry a featherhead like the

lovers he chose, Rain retreated from beneath the canvas. Now that he knew everyone was alive, he pushed the frame up, gathering the folds to collapse it in the middle.

The men holding the corners followed his example, leaving Lady Pamela and Teddy exposed and unharmed.

Guests gathered around Rain, fretting over the reports of dangerous fixtures—the antlers in the billiard room, too? He refrained from rolling his eyes. He'd have the lot taken down.

Leaving suggestions of earthquakes and blasts of wintery winds—which most of his guests accepted more readily than ghosts—Rain worked his way out of the room, leaving his sisters to quiet the crowd.

The chandelier in the entry had stopped swinging. He took the back stairs anyway, two at a time. He stopped at his father's suite first. It was early enough to find the duke sitting in his chair, reading a newspaper, and keeping an eye on the overhead fixture.

The duke shook out the paper and folded it. "I must say, your lady has certainly increased the entertainment around here. The footman says everyone is well?"

Rain took a steadying breath and maintained a composure he didn't feel. "In the music room, yes. Alicia is a bit shaken. Teddy is sulking. The guests will probably flee in the morning. I am checking on those who weren't downstairs. Why do you say 'my lady' did this? If you're referring to Lady Craigmores, she wasn't even there."

"I was referring to your ghost, but I suppose your new steward may be responsible for our apparition's new strength. I am fine. You should probably look after her next."

Entirely Rain's reaction. That his father understood simply proved the duke wasn't a stupid man. Bell was a desirable female—and all too evidently another Malcolm.

"Apparently one of the children in the nursery is seeing our ghost as well. I may need to go there next. I'll leave an extra servant in here to run messages until this is resolved."

This suite was large and could house a plethora of servants without his father noticing. The duke dismissed him with a wave.

Rain had to go to the north wing to reach Bell's suite anyway. The nursery was only up a flight from there. Since childhood, he'd never had reason to enter the nursery. His toddling nieces and nephews were mostly indistinguishable. He admired them when his sisters presented them to him, but after that, they vanished upstairs. He supposed they'd become uncontrollable monsters at some point, but everyone went through that stage. He'd wait until they were adults to sort them out.

Normally, he would have sent a servant except for Bell's warning about the lame child who saw ghosts. If Drucilla presented any danger to his household, he needed to know it. Nursery maids weren't much help when frightened. Besides, he felt guilty not knowing about the child's accident.

There were no chandeliers to swing in most of the rooms on the third floor and certainly not in the nursery. He knocked quietly before entering.

Bell sat beside the fire in the classroom, rocking a sleepy child in her lap. She looked up gratefully at sight of him. "Your father?" she whispered.

"Undisturbed. I'm not sure what Alicia's play was meant to accomplish, but it will no doubt rid the house of most of our guests. The children?" He glanced around for a nursemaid but this was a schoolroom, not the bedroom.

"Most of them slept through it. Only Drucilla heard. She says the ghost is angry, but she doesn't understand more. I don't think she's old enough to attend a séance, but I suppose she might learn, as I never have."

"We don't know such foolishness works," he reminded her. "Should I put her back to bed?"

She looked reluctant. "For now, I suppose. I haven't had time to talk to her mother."

There was the countess speaking—born and raised to rule the

lives of others. Her mother had taught her well. Rain lifted the sleeping child and let Bell lead the way.

He'd grown up in this nursery, and she knew more of it than he did. He supposed the nursery was a woman's territory—but Bell was his *steward*. She knew his ledgers as well as Davis had. She was turning his view of women as pretty ornaments on its head.

Ornaments were safer. Bell. . . was an enigma, one that could explode in his face.

At this moment, he couldn't convince himself that was entirely a bad thing.

She tucked in the child, took the arm he offered, and they slipped back to the hall. "What happened?" She waited until they were away from the nursery to ask.

"My guess is that our resident ghost wanted our full attention and was showing off what she could do if we don't listen." Normally, Rain wouldn't discuss his theory about supernatural activities, but Bell had a valid interest—and she listened without judgment. "After swinging all the chandeliers from the front to the back of the house, she dropped Teddy's canvas one on his head—and Alicia's and Lady Pamela's. It was quite a climactic ending to a rather predictable play. I fear Alicia is no playwright."

She swayed into him for just the briefest moment, as if needing his comfort. Rain wanted to hug her, but they had to keep their heads to survive this night.

"Alicia is accustomed to persuading people to do her bidding. One assumes she was hoping to persuade the ghost to listen to her." A smile laced her voice as they traversed the stairs on the way to her suite. "Unless you want her discovering one of the women's rights groups and standing on street corners, urging people to action, you'd probably best find her a charity that needs her support."

"You don't support this talk of women voting?" He couldn't contain his curiosity. Alicia as a persuader? Bell might be on to something.

“Of course I do,” she acknowledged with serenity as they reached her suite. “And should Alicia become involved, I will aid her in any way I can. But I am not someone who stands on the front lines. I prefer working in the background, where I can do the most good.”

He groaned, imagining Alicia on street corners and Bell printing signs and pamphlets. Rather than contemplate such a future, he opened the door of her new suite.

His sisters hadn’t arrived, thank all that was holy. Rain led Bell inside, shut the door, and swung her into his arms.

He needed this. He deserved this after tonight. He applied his mouth to hers with a hunger that grew reckless when she lifted her arms to his neck and pressed herself against him.

The key turned in the lock of its own accord.

BELL scarcely noticed as the brass key fell out of her lock. She had the most intense, most intelligent man in her life holding her as if she were his world. Her head spun from his kisses. And the rest of her. . . wanted. She wanted so very much. . .

She sighed in gratitude when Rain cupped her breasts. Her bodice buttoned all the way up the front, but she wore only a small corset with this old-fashioned working gown. She could feel his palms rubbing at her nipples, and desire coursed through her. Would it be so dreadful if she allowed him to. . .

A knock rapped at the door.

“I don’t want to stop,” he murmured huskily. “Can’t we make them go away?”

She ran her fingers over the sandpaper of his cheek, drinking in his closeness, his hot breath, the proximity of his mouth to hers, but even as she longed to cling, she stepped back and pushed at his chest. “I may not have the stupidity to agree to a séance at another time. And your grandmother may bring the house crashing down

around us if we don't try."

In the light of the lamps she'd left burning, she could see Rainford's angular jaw tighten. He had so many pressures to bear—she longed to help ease them.

But accepting his responsibility, he gave a curt nod and turned up the sconces while she hunted for the key. The lady was making it obvious what *she* wanted, but one goal conflicted with the other if the nag wanted a *séance*.

Fortunately, the ghost didn't stop Bell from unlocking the door and letting in Rain's sisters. They didn't seem to find it odd that Rain was here first or that the door was locked. They entered, chattering, and scattered about the room to admire the furnishings and rearrange the chairs.

Bell admired their assurance. This was their family home. They had no reason to lack confidence. Rain's poor ex-fiancée never had a chance unless she developed a backbone overnight.

Rain moved a heavy game table before the fire and helped arrange the chairs around it. He threw more coals on the grate and pulled out a chair for Bell while his sisters claimed their places. She could smell his shaving lotion and the male scent that was all his own. When he casually brushed her shoulder, she almost melted. She was worse than an animal in heat.

"May I just observe?" He didn't find a place for himself.

"Rainford, no," Estelle protested. "I'm sure the ghost wants all of us."

"I think it would be best if Rainford stays out of this for now." Bell firmly overrode his sisters.

She needed distance from the marquess. She still tingled in unseemly places after that kiss. The last time that had happened, the haunt had attempted to enter her. Besides, she felt safer if he could intervene as needed.

The sisters grumbled but took their places.

Bell didn't even look at Rainford as he settled in a wing chair out of her view. She concentrated on her table companions. "I have

no notion of what to do. You'll have to direct me."

"We usually focus on an object, like a crystal." Alicia placed a pretty piece of quartz in the table center. Other than appearing a trifle disheveled, she seemed none the worse for her encounter with the canvas.

"You are feeling quite strong enough to do this, Alicia?" Bell asked in concern. "Would you prefer we wait for another night?"

"You're the one who would delay." Victoria centered the crystal to her tastes. "Alicia has a head like a rock."

The other married sisters nodded agreement.

Alicia simply shrugged. "It is obvious our resident ghost wishes our undivided attention. My play accomplished that. So let's be done with this and see what she wants."

The sisters took each other's hands. Alicia took Bell's left and Victoria took her right, leaving the two mothers carrying children to sit across from her. Bell was terrified she would harm them in some way, but she didn't have enough knowledge to argue. She had studied journals on ghosts, but none had recommended séances as a means of communication.

That Rain allowed this to continue spoke of his desperation to help his father.

So Bell had to do it. She squeezed the hands holding hers. "What next?"

"First, we try concentrating on the crystal. Once we're all sufficiently mesmerized, I'll ask the spirit to speak. I suppose you must empty your head of thoughts." Alicia took over explanations.

Mesmerized? Rather than question, Bell simply stared at the pretty crystal. It gleamed softly in the distant lamplight. They'd deliberately positioned the table so no chandelier loomed over them. She didn't think crystals would fly or could hurt much, if they did.

*Not thinking* was difficult. Perhaps that was why the spirit encouraged her to kiss Rainford. That made her mindless swiftly enough.

Alicia began humming under her breath. She hummed about as well as she sang, which was to say, not well. Bell smiled to herself. Alicia was a genuinely kind and creative soul who wanted so much to be helpful. Bell was fine with letting her control the séance.

She didn't hear any ghosts. Not that she ever did, until they'd invaded her head. How did she empty her head?

"O spirit, are you here? Knock once for yes," Alicia intoned.

Twice for no, if she wasn't here? Bell hid her amusement.

No spirit rapped. Alicia muttered and squeezed her hand harder.

Was she supposed to put on a performance? She couldn't do that.

Alicia hummed some more, apparently more in frustration than in ghostly expectation. Finally, she suggested, "Let's try closing our eyes. Perhaps Bell needs no visual stimulation."

Closing her eyes only made Bell more aware of the large masculine presence sitting silently on the other side of the room. She could practically feel Rain suppressing laughter and impatience and frustration. Or perhaps she was thinking he felt as she did. Eyes closed, she sank into her memory of his kisses. She'd never known a man who interested her enough to consider a marriage bed. With Rainford, she could scarcely stop thinking of it—at least when she had nothing else to think of, like now.

That night they'd lain practically naked together. . . She wanted to experience more. Would it be so terrible of her if they shared a bed just once? It wasn't as if she were likely to marry. A woman who foolishly toppled at every noise—

A scream ripped the night.



## Eighteen

AT THE SCREAM, Bell predictably slumped in her chair. Rain was out of his seat before her hair hit the table.

Alicia frantically shook her head at him, warning him to stay away. The women continued holding hands as Bell began to shake. Rain fisted his fingers against his urge to snap her out of wherever she went when she was like this. He understood why she hated fainting. He could scarcely bear watching.

He deliberately forced his attention away to listen for more screams. Had that just been their resident haunt? He didn't hear it again. Unable to sit still, he opened the suite door and listened down the hallway, but all was silent.

A rasping voice jerked his attention back to the suite.

*His voice. His voice heals.*

Rain froze at the strange words. Bell seemed to still be unconscious, with wispy gold curls tumbling over one cheek and the other against the wood. But her lips moved.

*Enhance him. Save my son.* The voice was ragged and whispery, nothing like Bell's clear, crisp tones.

"Whose voice heals?" Victoria asked, sensibly.

No answer. Rain remained frozen.

"Save whom?" Salina demanded, apparently nailing down details.

*My son. Save the duke.*

That's what Bell had heard the first time. The ghost lacked clarity.

*His voice heals.* The whisper trailed away.

Bell still lay there, unconscious.

Rain was across the room in the time it took to breathe in. Terrified, he hauled her from the chair. He sought her pulse while holding her like a rag doll. “Bell,” he commanded. “Bell, you’re here, with us. Wake up.”

His sisters stared, as frozen as he had been.

She breathed. He could feel her breasts rising and falling. Her pulse was ragged.

*His voice heals.* What had the ghost meant by that? Just in case. . . Rain lowered his tone and applied the composed voice he’d trained himself to use. “Bell, Bell my dearest, Bell, the ghost is gone. Wake, please?”

She stirred. He inhaled in relief. His sisters crowded around, whispering to each other, probably praying as he couldn’t do right now. The woman he admired above all others still lay limp against him, although her pulse seemed stronger. He didn’t want to set her down. He crushed his hand in her hair, holding her head against his shoulder.

“Bell, can you hear me? I need to know what I should do next. Shall I tuck you into bed?” He added a hint of humor to his calm voice.

One of his sisters hmphed, but he ignored her. Bell moved her head. She almost seemed to be struggling, although it came through as twitches.

“Beautiful Bell, bounteous Lady Isobel, my gorgeous ghost hunter, please come back to us. My sisters are looking at us very strangely.” Rain was more focused on the woman in his arms, but he knew his sisters. He was giving them gossip to gnaw on for months.

She sighed a hot breath against his collar. He wished the stiff linen to Hades. He kissed her temple. “You can do it, my courageous Bell. Breathe. Let air into your lungs.” He spoke in his calmest tones while squeezing carefully beneath her rib cage, encouraging her diaphragm to expand and contract.

A moment later, she took a deep breath, coughed, and shook

her head, as if to clear it. Rain didn't want to set her down. He wanted to carry her to bed. But he couldn't, not with his sisters watching and fretting.

"One of you go to Drucilla," he murmured over Bell's head. "See if she's unharmed." He had no idea if that had been a child's cry. He simply wanted his sisters gone.

"That was the child screaming?" Estelle asked worriedly. "If you think Bell is all right, I'll see to her." Steady and reliable, his next oldest sister marched off.

"Estelle will see to Dru. She's good with children," he murmured to Bell, carrying her over to the settee. He thought she nodded.

"What do you think the spirit meant?" Alicia demanded impatiently. "What does it mean, *his voice heals*? Whose voice? How?"

Lowering Bell to the settee, Rain turned and caught Victoria's eye. "Go to Father, please. See if he's still awake and reassure him that all is well. Tell him we'll see him in the morning."

As the eldest, Vicky understood his unspoken command better. She caught Alicia's shoulder and gestured at Salina. "Bell needs quiet now. Let's leave her be. We can discuss this elsewhere."

"Where's her maid?" Alicia asked, refusing to go quietly. "Bell needs a maid to look after her."

To everyone's surprise, Bell raised her head and rubbed at her temple with confusion. "I told Button to wait on the guests first. I don't need help."

When Alicia would rush across the room to ask more questions, Victoria prevented her. "*Not now*. Go to Father, and let Sal and I go to our families." She all but shoved their youngest sister out the door.

As soon as the panel closed after them, Rain took the place beside Bell and pulled her into his lap. "I simply need to hold you and know you're breathing."

She snuggled against him without argument. "Did I drool and

twitch?" she asked with resignation. "Did I make a perfect spectacle of myself?"

"You fell asleep in a beautiful bundle of golden curls and frightened me half to death." Rain tried not to convey his utter terror that they had somehow managed to kill her before he'd had time to know her better.

"You're a smooth liar." She sighed and started to straighten.

Rain began unbuttoning her prim bodice instead. "I should loosen that corset. You were not breathing properly, and your heartbeat did not seem regular."

"Very smooth liar," she muttered as her bodice opened.

"That's because I'm not lying. I'm trained to observe, even when I'm having a heart attack." But his interest now was not that of a physician. She had that part right. Her breasts swelled nicely above her chemise and the short corset. She was breathing normally now. Maybe if he surprised her. . .

She gasped when he unfastened the corset and ran his hand beneath her chemise to her aroused nipple. Her heart rate increased pleasingly, so he didn't stop.

"What did the ghost say? Did she say we should do this? How will that help your father?" She didn't shove him away, as she ought, but let him cup the heavy grapefruit of her bare breast.

Knowing she wanted this as much as he did allowed Rain to proceed slowly despite his raging desire. He was confident that she'd not felt these sensations before, and he wanted her to enjoy the experience, to trust him. "The ghost was her usual insensible self. I think she is too old to remember names and is reacting more than thinking."

He hadn't given it any thought until this second, but it sounded right. His elderly patients often forgot names and, sometimes, even why they were in his office. They just reacted to pain or discomfort and ended up where they knew to find relief.

"But what did she say?" She fiddled with his cravat, attempting to loosen it.

“The same as she’s said before, only this time, she insists someone has a healing voice and someone should enhance it. You need to attract younger spirits.” He helped her unknot the tie and unfasten his shirt studs.

He was hard and ready to take her. He was terrified she would run away if he did. He’d learned his lesson—not every woman wanted him in her bed.

She slipped her hand inside his shirt, found his nipple, and pinched—hard. “You are trying not to hope, aren’t you?”

That did it. She’d offered a challenge. He accepted.

Lifting her easily, Rain stood and carried her into the bedroom.

BELL KNEW SHE SHOULD RESIST, but her resistance was nil this evening. She wanted this man as she never had any other. She wanted to know she wasn’t an oddity who could never have a normal life. She wanted. . . so very, *very* much. How much longer must she go on never knowing what real life was about?

He was right. She’d been letting her fear of fainting and spirits control her life. If she ever wanted to live, that had to stop. She felt safe with this man holding her as if she were a precious gem. . . A hank of platinum-colored hair fell over his furrowed brow and his gray eyes smoldered with an intensity that burned straight through her.

So she let him lay her on the bed and undress her. She could pretend Rainford was being a conscientious physician, except she tugged at his clothes while he unfastened hers. Once she had his shirt open, she ran her hand over his rock-hard abdomen and marveled at the ridges there. Did most men feel like this? She didn’t think so.

“You must spend a great deal of time beating up your punching bags,” she marveled as he impatiently cast aside his hampering attire.

The furrows on his brow relaxed and he actually smiled. He loosened his waistband before lying down beside her and kissing her bare breasts. "I lead a very boring life. It's either beat up bags and lift weights or become a rake, and I don't have the time for the latter."

"And you're too well bred to tup the maids or keep a mistress in the same house with your sisters and your father." That was as much a reminder as a comment.

"I will marry you as soon as you say the word. I do not consider you a mistress. As you have rightfully demonstrated, you are a countess and do not need me." Propped on powerful arms that bulged with muscles she hadn't known existed, he leaned over and tasted her nipples.

Bell knew she should argue about her suitability for marriage, but she couldn't think coherently while her body was on fire. Fervently, she returned his kisses and caresses, losing herself in sensation. Somehow, her skirt and petticoat fell away. Rainford might not keep mistresses at home, but he was experienced in divesting ladies of their garments.

Had she consented to this? She thought she had, because she was exploring below Rainford's waist, trying to understand what she'd seen in her vision of his bath. That was apparently all the permission he required.

It didn't appear to matter what was proper or what she should do. This man knew far more than she did, and he didn't seem to object to anything she tried. So she explored and responded with the wild abandon of an animal. When his long fingers stroked her through the opening in her drawers, she bit his hard shoulder and drew blood. He growled in her ear, then nibbled the lobe. She nearly shook with need.

He obliged by caressing her where she ached the most—a physician's healing hand, she tried to think of it. But when she came apart beneath his expertise, he caught her cries with his mouth and drank deeply, leaving her even more breathless.

An instant later, her drawers ended up with her skirts and his trousers, and she finally had her wish. His maleness poised at her entrance, and she could touch him.

Rainford groaned and let her test him. She had hardly begun to explore when he licked her nipple again, impatiently pulled her legs around him, and drove inside.

Bell opened like a flower, taking him in, crying out when he breached a barrier, and then meeting him thrust for thrust. It seemed imperative to move, to keep up with him, to take this strong man inside of her and wring him dry.

Only when her womb opened and Rain pumped his seed with a force that caused both of them to quake did she have a vague grasp of what they had done.

She'd given the nagging witch what she'd wanted.

RAIN WAS ACCUSTOMED to climbing out of bed, pulling on his clothes, and leaving after sex. It had ever been a physical release, much as beating up a punching bag was. He'd never been the lovelorn type to moon over a female.

But lying here mindless now, with Bell's warm breath and soft curves easing his urge to solve problems, he lacked the desire to leave Bell's side. Unlike other women, she didn't want to talk as he rolled off of her, even though he knew he'd taken her virginity. He'd meant to do so. He'd assigned her this room with every intention of making her his, in whatever way she would have him. But somehow, in staking his claim, he'd left a piece of himself in her care.

They had a thousand things they should say to each other, which were probably better said when dressed and sitting over a breakfast table. He should leave. But when she merely curled against his side and fell asleep, he followed suit.

Much later, when he woke in the early morning hours, Rain

still didn't know whether to apologize. Neither of them had pulled the draperies, and a gray light found its way across the covers. Bell cuddled next to him like a warm blanket, her hand across his abdomen. He knew she was awake, but he wouldn't harm her by using her for his morning arousal.

"Don't leave." He finally spoke his worst fear, not even knowing he feared her loss until he said it. "I will marry you or not, as you wish, but please do not leave."

She kissed his chest, a gentle flutter against his skin. "So very romantic. I like that about you. Now go, before Button decides to make this the first day of her employment with me."

"We need to talk," he said with all the authority in him. "About the ghost, about last night, about the future. And I wish we had the privacy of sharing my chamber without everyone watching our every move."

"I know, but first, we must visit your father. The only healers here are you and him. One of you must have what the witch wants." She spoke as if she held something back.

Rain wanted to question, but he was too relieved that she understood his priorities. "I'm not a healer. Voices cannot heal. But I agree, we need to tell him what she said."

Rain leaned over and worshipped at her breasts just long enough to know he could arouse her again. Then he kissed her swollen lips and rolled from the bed.

"I hope you'll let me share your bath someday." He nodded at the bathing room with the cast iron tub and running water. "But I don't want to press my luck today. After yesterday's drama, I suspect we'll have guests lining up to escape."

She pushed up on her elbows and frankly studied him as he yanked his drawers on over his tumescence. "I think I'll enjoy the bath idea. I had no notion I was a wanton woman until you came along."

Damn, but that had him hard all over again. Rain pulled up his trousers and leaned over to kiss her. "A wanton woman would not



have come to me untouched. I want to respect whatever forces allowed me to be your first.”

And there it was, the hint that it might have been metaphysical, driven by a nagging hag. He knew what he'd wanted for some time. But Isobel. . . had been persuaded and not by him.

“Curiosity?” she suggested. “See, I can be as romantical as you.”

They both knew better. She hadn't been curious until he and his ghostly nag came along, but Rain kissed her and hurriedly finished dressing. His valet would gossip. It wouldn't take long for the gossip to spread to his sisters' maids. And his sisters knew he'd been here last night. Bell didn't deserve that kind of speculation. His instinct was to protect.

He need to throw the entire company out of the house so he could have Bell to himself for a while.

For the sake of Bell's reputation, he slipped down to the duke's suite and let his father's servants find him in last night's rumpled clothes, sleeping in one of the sitting room chairs.

That should keep gossip to a minimum for a while longer.

## Nineteen

GRATEFUL SHE HAD TOLD Button she didn't need the maid's services until after the guests departed, Bell stripped the stained sheet from the bed and rinsed it out in the tub. The luxury of having her own tub. . . She could never go back to Craigmores if she became so spoiled as to expect hot baths at any time.

Unable to resist, she filled the tub with hot water and bathing salts and leeched away any aches from the evening's exertions.

Fear over what she and Rain may have done had her stepping out and hurriedly drying off rather than dreaming of repeating their performance. Was she even now carrying Rain's child? One possibly inhabited by the spirit of his grandmother? If the chandeliers quit swaying and doors quit slamming. . .

She'd never wanted to experience chaos, but she prayed for a slamming door now.

She hung the sheet over the tub to dry and locked her bedchamber door. Then she returned to her original room in the main residence and threw back the covers as if she'd slept there. She had decisions to make and didn't wish to be forced into them. She had spent much of her existence helpless, but now that she was free, she meant to take charge of her future.

She dressed in her usual dark office gown, marking her as paid staff and not one of the guests. She'd dressed like this even at Craigmores. It was simpler to go from kitchen to field to village wearing few petticoats and dark colors. She might be a countess with her own estate, but she would never be an idle lady trapped in corsets and crinolines.

Thinking of Lady Phoebe in her split skirts, feathered hat, and

riding a penny-farthing all over Edinburgh, Bell smiled as she descended to breakfast. Malcolms were known for eccentricity. Rainford's family managed a form of unconventional decorum.

The lush tropical plants, the odd pets, and the need to explore séances and astrology were outcroppings of family talents. The duke's family simply had no need to explain their weird abilities.

She stopped to tell Mrs. Franklin that she wouldn't need a maid in her suite yet. She didn't want to cause additional trouble until the guests were gone. The housekeeper nodded and bustled on.

Rainford wasn't in the breakfast room when she entered, but it was obvious gossip of the séance had gone around. Everyone wanted a word of hope. She could offer them nothing and refused to be an object of speculation, so she didn't join in.

The slam of trunks hitting the marble stairs had everyone anxiously glancing up, but no chandeliers swayed, no doors slammed. The conversation turned to the weather and the train schedule. Unless Alicia summoned more excitement, it appeared Rainford was correct, their guests were escaping the madhouse.

Lady Pamela arrived on Teddy's arm. Bell had thought the actress had agreed to act in the play to attract one of Rain's titled, wealthy guests, but perhaps she'd misunderstood the lady's need to be seen. Or the play last night had been such a fiasco, that the actress hadn't received the offers she'd wanted.

That was an unworthy thought. Bell finished her toast, said her farewells to the guests preparing to leave, and returned upstairs to see if the duke was ready for visitors.

She ran into Rain coming from that direction. He'd taken time to dress properly in his usual stiff collar and tailored suit, the very picture of a titled, wealthy gentleman—except his features were rigid with determination and his gaze, steely.

Instead of being intimidated, she enjoyed the view. Daringly, she took his arm when he approached. "How is your father?"

He unbent slightly to crush her hand in place as if seeking reassurance. "Eager to pretend I can heal him. Are you ready to try

once more? I despise raising hopes, but sometimes, hope eases pain and allows patients to live a little longer.”

She heard the despair behind his resolve. “I’ll admit that using your voice seems a peculiar means of healing, but if hope helps, then perhaps soothing voices do, too. We can only try.”

With a bleak bow, Rainford led her into the ducal suite as if this were a funeral march.

The duke’s manservant greeted them with anticipation, so he’d heard about last night’s séance. His Grace sat up against his pillows, looking paler and more like a silver-haired skeleton than ever. His breakfast tray hadn’t been touched.

But his eyes were bright and clear as he watched them enter. “I’ve studied all the Malcolm journals on healing, and not once has anyone mentioned the power of voice. We do, however, have family members who can command with their voices. Or entice, like sirens.” He appeared amused at the idea.

Rainford grimaced. “I should *sing* the evil spirits away?”

“Is that any different than a laying on of hands as they do in some primitive religions?” Bell asked. “Just because we can’t *see* spirits, doesn’t mean they don’t exist or respond to different energies. So let us keep open minds.”

“I’m not singing.” Rainford gestured for his father to lie down in his bed. “I am not convinced that the ghost even means me. Perhaps she meant Father to use his voice.”

“My mother didn’t live to know the names of my children, so she doesn’t know yours,” the duke reminded them. “If she’d meant me, she’d have said so.”

Bell let the men quibble while she concentrated on her sister’s explanation of how Iona enhanced her husband’s gift by bonding.

This time, Bell thought she and the marquess might be *bonded*, if the marital sense of the word counted.

AS A PHYSICIAN, Rain knew women could be healers, nurses, and midwives. He was still reluctant to expose a countess to a patient or his father to a lady. But if Bell could attend a séance and be possessed by his grandmother, he had to accept that she wouldn't quake at seeing a duke in his nightshirt.

Still, he felt the last thing from composed as he stripped back the bedcovers. The father he remembered had once been as broad and strong as Rain, but these days, he had shrunk to half that size. Rain could feel every rib as he poked and prodded, testing for sore places.

The duke placed his own hands over the upper part of his abdomen. "The chronic indigestion and the inability to digest solid food indicates the involvement of stomach or duodenum. I've read everything in the books. Very little seems to apply."

Rain knew all that. He also knew his father had suffered a severe blow to that area from a carriage accident a few years ago and that he'd always been a picky eater because of the embarrassing results of chronic indigestion. But the emaciation was definitely caused by not eating enough to keep a bird alive these last years.

To Rain's surprise, the countess covered the duke's hands with her own. Was she helping his father enhance his own healing powers? Rain waited with interest.

"Nothing," the duke admitted. "I haven't the strength to generate heat even with Lady Craigmores aid."

That was quite possibly because enhancers only seemed to work with close family, husbands—or lovers—as his cousin Gerard had finally admitted. The earl's wife had experimented with other Malcolms and enhanced no one else but the earl and her sister.

Had Rain unconsciously taken Bell last night simply to enhance abilities he didn't believe he possessed?

Supremely aware of Bell's petite femininity, he was pretty certain that had not been his incentive at all.

"You must call me Bell as the rest of your indecorous family

does.” She corrected the duke.

Rain hid a smile. Few dared speak to his father with such familiarity.

Not taking umbrage, the duke grunted agreement. “They learned that from their mother. My wife disliked propriety and thought titles a hypocrisy.”

Despite the low-key conversation, Rain couldn’t relax. He was unaccustomed to losing, and this was a battle of life and death. He *had* to win this battle. He had no desire to be duke until he was old and gray.

Once his father admitted Bell’s hands didn’t help, Rain stepped in. Generally, he focused on his patient and did not speak during an examination.

In the interest of unscientific curiosity, he covered Bell’s hands with his own and used his *voice*. “According to an article in a recent medical journal, in dissecting cadavers, Baron Rokitansky discovered a condition involving the superior mesenteric artery where it compressed the duodenum against the abdominal aorta.”

Rain used his best patient-doctor voice, a soothing murmur that seemed to calm his more excitable patients. He knew his recitation of the baron’s discoveries was enough to put *him* to sleep. He had no reassuring platitudes to offer, so facts were all he had. The condition he described was inoperable under current knowledge, and the theory was developed from dead people. He couldn’t cut open a dying man in hopes he could rearrange arteries and organs.

As he spoke, Rain imagined the area he described, trying to fix in his mind his long-ago autopsies as a student. If the artery bent at a wrong angle, it might cut off circulation in the duodenum, thus backing up food and causing indigestion. He could almost *see* the problem in his mind.

Bell’s hands were small and fragile between his and his father’s. Soft, tender, they heated his palms, providing an ease of tension he didn’t normally experience when examining a patient. He tried to concentrate on what it would take to straighten an artery, to ease

the duodenum so it fluxed naturally. . . but her scent and touch distracted him.

His body recalled the excitement of her inexperienced kisses, the way her nipples felt beneath his fingers and her soft cries when he caressed her. He'd used none of his usual finesse when he'd taken her, but she had responded as naturally as if she'd been made for him.

He'd taken no precautions. She could be carrying his child even now.

His palm grew hotter as he thought about Bell lying beneath him, welcoming him, growing big with his child. . .

At the same time, he continued his discourse, moving their joined hands to a place where the energy flow indicated pain. The duke never complained, but then, he wouldn't. Rain knew that his father suffered, which was why he didn't eat. And here it was, the source. He'd not felt this odd knot of energy before.

He worked out the details of the location hidden by layers of muscle, deep within the tissues. If he could only slide his thumb inside and bypass the compression, connect the duodenum directly. . . He directed the energy as he spoke, creating pressure that shifted the flow.

"If we turn him on his side, reduce the pressure. . ." Rain continued talking as they worked. His father didn't object. Perhaps he'd put him to sleep.

He tested the area again, feeling the pain lessen. Odd, to feel someone else's pain, but it seemed to make sense. They were all connected, if he just thought about it.

"He's sleeping, Rain," Bell whispered. "Should we let him be?"

Jarred back to the reality, Rain blinked and shook off the spell he'd talked himself into. His father lay on his side, breathing easily, looking relaxed. Perhaps the duke's own healing touch had momentarily relieved the pain.

Holding Bell's hand firmly as a touchstone to reality, Rain turned to the anxious valet. "Continue the fattening diet—beef

broth from fatty cuts for strength, potato soups with cheese cooked to a soupy consistency, creamy puddings with lots of sugar, anything he can keep down.”

The valet nodded anxiously but knew better than to ask if the duke was better. Rain doubted it, but the experience had been too weird to not feel as if *something* had occurred. For one, he was almost certain his diagnosis was correct, as he hadn’t been before.

Bell refused to let him go once they were in the corridor. “I *felt* heat this time. Does this mean anything?”

Rain ran his hand through his hair, not wanting to speak his hope. “Only time will tell. I have no idea what we did, except I could feel his pain. And it seemed to decrease when we turned him over, which might confirm my diagnosis. Knowing what might be wrong doesn’t help when there is nothing I can do to fix it.”

She nodded, wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him briefly, then fled.

He understood. Exhausted, he was too weak to resist. He’d stand here in public and hold her until all the tension and roiling emotion settled down, as only Bell could settle them. He’d swear she would face a dragon with a smile and a teacup. He was the one who’d want a sword to slice off noses.

Instead, he clenched his teeth and strode down to the shooting alley he’d created in the deepest corner of the cellars. Or dungeons, depending on how far back one considered the history. He needed to gut things for a while.

Teddy was there ahead of him. “Shooting people before breakfast, Cuz?”

“I could ask the same of you.” While Rain loaded harmless cartridges into his pistol, Teddy fired off wild shots that didn’t even brush the target.

“A new artistic technique, decorating the wall with holes?” Rain held up his pistol, sighted, and shot off a volley as quickly as the pistol would allow. A hole developed in the center ring.

“I do not understand women.” Teddy added ammunition to an



old military pistol from his father.

“You wish to understand them, why?” His sisters had convinced him long ago that women were from a different planet, if not universe. Acceptance that he’d never understand them had seemed easiest.

“If I understood what they wanted, perhaps I could keep one around long enough to finish their damned portraits.” Teddy fired more slowly, hitting the outer rim once.

“One assumes they receive little satisfaction in having their portrait painted.” Feeling a trifle more in control now that he’d blasted the center out of the target, Rain could find amusement in his cousin’s complaint. “Do you offer them the proceeds if you sell the portrait?”

Teddy shot him a disgruntled look. “Of course not! How would I ever earn my way like that? Paint is expensive!”

“I do see your predicament.” Tongue firmly in cheek, Rain rattled off another volley, deliberately taking out the second ring. “You have nothing to offer them but your charm and talent.”

“I offer them all the comforts of my home, and I’m good in bed.” Teddy growled in irritation and fired another shot, hitting the outer ring again.

“That may be enough for you, but I’m under the impression that bedplay is not enough for women. Try thinking outside yourself for a change.” Thinking about how good Bell was in bed threw off Rain’s next shots.

*What did Bell want?* Rain loaded his weapon again and considered it while Teddy whined. He didn’t really know, he concluded, because women were from outer space. It irritated him that there were no books on the subject from which he could learn.

“I need to ask more for my work,” Teddy was concluding when Rain returned to the conversation. “I’ll have to find a better gallery.”

“Or a wealthy wife,” Rain suggested. “Instead of picking up stray cats without a farthing to their names, meet women with

money and time on their hands. They might not make good subjects for your portraits, but they might be more appreciative of your attentions.”

“Huh.” Teddy shot again, this time hitting a little closer to the center. “Make the social rounds? Drudgery, indeed. I’d have to find a tailor, I suppose.”

Given that Teddy was wearing baggy corduroys and a paint-splattered waistcoat from a prior decade—Rain conceded that might be necessary. “Go to my man. I’ll tell him to bill me. We can launch you the way we launched the girls.”

Teddy chuckled morosely. “I told Pamela I’d build her a theater when I came into funds. She told me she’d be old and gray before that happened. Think she’s a witch and knows something we don’t?”

“One can hope.” Feeling somewhat grounded after this inane conversation, praying the theater suggestion was Teddy’s pie-in-the-sky dreaming, Rain cleaned out his pistol and set it back in the cabinet.

He’d stop by his steward’s office and simply ask Bell what she wanted. He had wealth and power. He could provide anything she asked, if she’d stay.

He was pretty certain he wanted her to stay. A woman completely unlike most flibbertigibbet females was a rarity he didn’t wish to lose, even if she disturbed all the ghosts in the castle.

Taking the back stairs up to the north wing, hoping to steal kisses and maybe more in the privacy of Bell’s office, Rain was unprepared for angry voices when he reached the normally empty corridor.

“That is completely unacceptable, sir. Stand back or I shall be forced to—”

*Bell’s voice.* Fury rising, Rain took off at a run.

GRABBING the umbrella she kept on hand, Bell jabbed the point at the slim young man who had dared to reach for her. His words had been beyond insulting. That he didn't take *no* for an answer was infuriating.

Lord Nevins paid no heed but grabbed the umbrella before she could run him through with the steel tip. While he struggled to wrench it from her grip, Bell kicked his kneecap, then trod his toe. She wore boots. He didn't.

Heavy footsteps pounded down the hall, and the door nearly soared off its hinges.

It was a bit of a blur after that. Nevins flew backward, releasing his hold on the umbrella. Bell stumbled and reached for her desk to prevent falling. Fearing she'd faint, she began counting backward. Instead of feeling the usual spirits prying at her consciousness, she felt. . . a suffocation?

Rain slammed his hard fist into the gentleman's weak jaw, and she winced. The baron was not muscular. He staggered. Before the younger man could raise his fists, Rainford grabbed the back of Nevins' collar and bodily flung him into the hall.

Then he slammed the office door and locked it. Fury blackened the marquess's eyes as he swung around to find Bell cowering against the desk, still holding her umbrella. She wasn't certain she'd ever seen the self-possessed lord so very angry.

"Do I murder him or just fling him into the snow?" he demanded.

Before she gathered her scattered wits or examined the odd *energy* around them, Rainford crossed the small space and took her

in his arms. "You didn't faint."

So she hadn't. Interesting. "Too furious," she decided.

As a reward, she clung to his welcoming embrace, relishing his hard chest and pounding heart just for a moment, just long enough to regain her equilibrium and stop the shaking. "He was under the impression that I could be bought."

It had been a very curious conversation, right up until Nevins had tried to touch her person, and she'd reached for the umbrella.

"I'll kill him," Rain arbitrarily decided. "But I'll throw him in the snow and let him freeze first. Maybe I'll let him run and shoot him down like the vermin he is."

Bell offered a watery chuckle. Now that the moment of ugliness was over, she preferred a more tidy resolution. "Don't, please. I believe he is a particular friend of Lady Dalrymple. It would be an embarrassment to her. I'll ask Franklin to have his bags packed and removed to the carriage door. You needn't do a thing. Why aren't you upstairs in your study?"

She'd been terrified that no one would hear her if she screamed. She was trying to be sensible and not weep like a schoolgirl, but she didn't react well to confusion.

Rain rocked her against him, refusing to let go. "It was stupid of me to treat you like Davis. You cannot work down here alone."

Returned to her reality, Bell shoved at his chest. "I will learn to handle idiots. I know how. I was caught by surprise that he seemed so very certain that I was available for a price. I stupidly tried to reason with him."

"To men of that ilk, all women have a price. And because you choose to take employment, he assumes you are no different. I had hoped that by seeing me treat you as the lady you are, the guests would respect you. I cannot believe Nevins is so abysmally stupid." Rain reluctantly released her.

"I'd like a bell pull installed." Gathering her composure, Bell set aside her umbrella. "And I should like to go upstairs for some tea while I order Nevins to the devil."

"I would prefer you tell me to murder him and install your office in the library where no one ever goes," he grumbled, leading her into the corridor.

"Including most of your staff," she reminded him. "I need to be able to speak with them upon occasion, and they're more comfortable here. And you have given me permission to order them as needed without bothering you. Your time is better used elsewhere than murdering guests."

Bell wished she could explain the oppressive atmosphere she'd experienced in Nevins' presence, but Rain wouldn't understand if she couldn't.

Having him beside her as they strolled the halls created an intimacy almost as exciting as having him in her bedchamber. Whatever drew them together was almost palpable.

She wondered if he felt it, too. Rainford was ever the proper marquess, his pale hair artfully arranged, his jaw shaven despite the fashion. With those jutting cheekbones, he had the icy look of a thunder god. Today, his cravat was a bit awry after the fisticuffs, and she daringly reached over to rearrange it.

The iceberg glared down at her with an expression that should boil water.

"May I come to you tonight?" he asked in cool tones that belied his expression.

"Button is eager to take up residence," she said in regret. "I do not know how we can be discreet."

"To hell with being discreet. Let me announce our betrothal and be damned to them all. Nevins and his ilk would not dare touch you then."

Bell couldn't help her heart beating a little faster at his decidedly unromantic suggestion. She laughed a little to still her foolishness. "Ever the conquering hero, without an ounce of poetry in your nature."

He bestowed an icy glare on her, but even he couldn't argue that wasn't a real proposal.

“The wedded state has never been my goal,” she continued before he could find better words. “You have heard the story of my mother’s destructive marriage? I know you are not a drunkard and destitution is not on your horizon, but marriage comes with a high price. I’d rather know that I can take care of myself.”

And if he was to be a duke someday, his wife would very much need to stand on her own in a world of which Bell knew little.

“I have never doubted for a moment that you can take care of yourself, possibly better than I can since I cannot be with you every minute. Admittedly, though, marriage entails dealing with my demanding family.” His words were dry as they entered the main hall to the raucous pounding of piano keys and a gaggle of children racing for the door. As departing guests cried commands to servants and others shouted farewells over the cacophony, the parrot squawked its displeasure.

“It is rather like an inn, is it not?” Bell suggested. “Marriage to you would be more like marrying the local pub owner. I can understand why your former fiancée quaked at the notion.”

He shrugged. “The castle’s size has its purpose. Living in rural oblivion requires offering hospitality if I’m to keep up with political and economic affairs. In a few months, as members of parliament travel to London, many will stop here to consult with the duke.” He looked down at her with amusement. “You should listen and choose a proxy for your vote.”

She didn’t have time to respond. A gentleman called for Rainford’s attention, and she saw the butler sorting through the melee of luggage and guests in the entry hall. She’d prefer to catch Franklin now than track him down in his lair later.

The butler puffed up like an enraged badger when told Nevins had behaved inappropriately. Ensured that the problem would be removed, Bell went in search of tea. It had been a very eventful morning.

“There you are, Bell,” Alicia cried as Bell stopped in the breakfast room to fill a cup. “We were just coming in search of

you. Do you sing?"

"Not a note," she said complacently. "I don't play the piano, either. My music teachers despaired of me. Now give me a list of numbers to add—" She laughed as Alicia waved away her talent with distaste.

"Teddy refuses to participate in any more dramas. We need more talent for the evening's entertainment. Do you think we could have the children sing?" Alicia winced as someone hit a bad note in the music room.

"Why not something a little more sedate this evening, like cards? Or charades? Then you'll have time to talk to the governess and ask if any of the children might sing and give them time to practice." Which reminded her that she needed to check on Drucilla. Had she gone out with the rest of the children?

"Cards! Do you play cards? If you can do mathematics. . . ." Without waiting for a reply, Alicia raced off to harass her sisters about card games.

Lady Pamela and Lady Dalrymple entered the breakfast room, arm in arm, whispering to each other. At sight of Bell, they cut her dead and continued into the room without speaking.

Well, charming. What had she done to offend a bad actress and Dru's mother?

"I'VE EXAMINED the trust agreement thoroughly." Later that afternoon, Sir Harry sat by the fire in Rain's study, sipping his best brandy. "Trusts are not entailments, but the terms are similar in this case. I agree with your brother-in-law that the rules are straightforward and unbreakable. The best you can do is steer as much of the expendable monies as you can into investing outside the trust."

"Building new cash reserves means reducing or cutting allowances to my family." Rain fretted over the numbers Harry had

set in front of him.

“Your sisters are all well settled. They won’t starve.” Harry waved a dismissive hand. “If you have any wish to control your future, you need to start soon.”

“Even if I marry tomorrow, there is no guarantee I’ll have a son in five years. That’s not enough time to build another fortune, and it would involve cutting upkeep to the estate and tenants.” His father would never countenance that, but the duke. . . might not be with them much longer. Rain refrained from rubbing his temple and sipped his brandy. He could see why men of lesser means might become drunkards.

A knock on the door interrupted their discussion of the impossible. Harry finished off his drink and rose to let in Estelle. “My lady, always a pleasure. I’ll leave you to your brother while I find someone to break some balls with.”

Estelle sniffed at the billiard slang but didn’t comment.

Rain stood and politely waited until his sister perched on a chair. “Is Father awake yet?”

“Awake and insisting he feels much better, but we both know he’d say that even if he was at death’s door. Garland and I have discussed this, and with your permission, we mean to stay here until the end. You are under an unbearable burden. We’d like to help where we can.”

His sister’s gift mostly involved perfumes and her famous soaps. Rain knew the soaps might dispense contentment—or itch like the devil if she was angry—but they did not heal. “Your husband would do better looking after his own estate. We cannot predict how long the family fortune will be around.”

“We understand. We can arrange to lease out the manor while we’re here. That will relieve the expense of servants and upkeep. The children are too young to know the difference. We can wait a few years before sending our son to school. You cannot be expected to run both estates, assist with Father’s political responsibilities, and hunt for a wife at the same time. Let us help.”



Rain didn't know where to begin in discouraging his sister's eager assistance. "Thank Garland for his generous offer. But I know he has political plans of his own. It's important that he continue. Have him look at the cost of using the London townhouse instead of your manor if he doesn't mean to run for a local borough. I'm sure Father still has enough influence to find him a position in government that could lead to better appointments."

Estelle nervously locked and unlocked her fingers. "We'll discuss it. London is no place for the children, though, and I hate to be parted from them. I can see we've been living extravagantly, and it's time we look to ourselves instead of to you for solutions."

He ought to feel relieved. Mostly, he felt like a failure that he had to ask his sisters to help solve a problem he'd created by not marrying or being able to heal his father. "The children are fine in the nursery, although admittedly, York is much further from London than Somerset. If only Sommersville was in better condition, you'd do better to move in there and run for local representation. Although it's hard to represent the common man while living in a ducal palace." Rain respected the irony of living in apparent splendor on shoestrings. "I am sorry I have placed you in this position."

"It is our own fault for expecting you to do everything." She stood, her chin set determinedly. "Helen asks if she might stay on a while longer. She cannot afford a governess, and if we leave the children with you, we'd leave our governess as well. Of course, if Garland prefers Sommersville, we'll take Helen with us."

One more dependent wouldn't break him. "It's her choice. We are isolated. She may find it tedious. And if she is looking for a husband. . ." Rain let that thought hang there.

Estelle offered him a small grin. "I'll let her know you want only young virgins. And perhaps I'll mention a penchant for chaining women to the bed."

Rain rolled his eyes and let his sister escape unmolested. And here he'd been worried the house would be empty in the future.

If his father died, he might have to move to the ducal estate and leave Yates to Teddy. He shuddered at the thought. He'd always hated the eccentric, crumbling old palace in Somerset. Riddled with tunnels and ghosts, it was an architectural legend, not a home.

If Lady Dalrymple stayed here, so would Drucilla. He hoped Helen did not expect him to heal her daughter. She needed a knowledgeable bone doctor. He could call in one from York, he supposed, although London would be better. Or Edinburgh.

The family would damned well miss having the duke's healing energies.

On that thought, Rain put aside his ledgers and set out for his father's suite. The entry hall was still bustling with guests departing for the afternoon train, so he took the back stairs. He knew he was missing an opportunity to learn more about all the young misses who had been presented with such hopes to him. Perhaps he should ask them if they knew mathematics. He seemed to have a penchant for bluestockings with the backbones of generals.

Hearing feminine voices in the ducal suite, he entered without knocking. His father was in his favorite chair by the fire, warmly wrapped in a blanket, with a mug of what Rain hoped was hot broth in his hand.

Bell was there with the maid he'd assigned to her, the one with buckteeth and one crossed eye. Whenever his sisters arrived, lady's maids had to be summoned from thin air. He assumed they'd taught this one her duties out of desperation for enough hands. The fact that Button was a talented seamstress had raised her to a position someone of her looks would not normally attain.

"Lady Craigmores is a clever lass." The duke greeted Rain with a smile and winked at the countess. "She has determined that my valet should not be confined to my rooms seven days a week. And even though he needn't dress me any longer and is quite useless except to force me to take my medicine, he should be able to do

mending and cleaning in places where he can talk to others. So Button is to wait on me during the hours Lady C is in her office and doesn't need her."

"Most clever," Rain agreed. "If only my sisters would all depart and hadn't need of Button as well. Perhaps now that this latest round of entertainments has ended, there will be less demand for her valuable time."

Looking as if she'd rather disappear into the wallpaper, the maid picked up the tea tray, curtsied, and fled to the hall.

The duke contentedly sipped from his mug.

Bell was the one who shot him daggers. "Button is a hard worker. She can mend clothes while she keeps His Grace company. And if she's assigned to me, then she is of little use to your sisters. They prefer the other maids, in any case. She's mostly been consigned to clothing repairs, although she's most excellent with arranging hair."

Rain enjoyed her ire. Other than her request for Button as her maid, she had not bothered consulting him about any of the rest. She simply did what she thought made sense. He liked that even better, although he wasn't about to let anyone know he approved of her managing ways.

"My sisters are scheming to find ways to save their own funds by staying here. You'd think bankruptcy imminent. Anyone have a notion why that is?" Rain crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows quizzically.

The duke chortled. "You've only talked to the husbands, haven't you? They pet your sisters, tell them all is well, and not to worry their little heads."

Rain did the same. It saved on drama. But he assumed that meant Bell had talked directly to his sisters. He seriously glared at the interfering countess this time. "Estelle and Sal are with child. They needn't be fretting over finances."

Unperturbed by his glare, Bell poured tea. "Any woman who can bear a child has the strength to undertake any task that

interests her. Men are the weaklings who break in fear of maternity. If you'll stay with your father until Button returns, my lord, I'll take this opportunity to carry some of the ledgers to my new suite where I can work undisturbed."

She bobbed a pretty curtsy at the duke. "Your valet has orders to see that the kitchen delivers more soup in an hour. I believe that one is to be a cream soup. You'll enjoy it."

She swept out in a rustle of petticoats. Rain had to resist turning to watch.

It had taken a moment to grasp what she had done. The lady was not just clever, but a conniving witch of the best kind.

She'd cleared her maid out of her suite and told Rain she would be there all alone, leaving him to decide what to do about it.

"The two of you are wearing me out just watching you." Sounding more cheerful than usual, the duke pushed out of his chair. "Help me back to bed. I think I'll take a nap before my next infusion of soup."

With concern, Rain helped his father up. "How is the pain today?"

"No pain." The duke gestured impatiently. "Food is staying down. Bring your lady back here before dinner so we can try whatever you did again. I've eaten well all day."

"You really need a man to help you." Despite his gauntness, his father was not a lightweight. Button could not help him back to bed.

"No, I really need a woman," the duke retorted. "And so do you. Go frig her, boy, or you're not the man I thought you were."

Shocked, Rain chose not to interpret this the way it sounded. "I take it you're feeling better. We'll be back this evening if you think we're helping."

Rain left the moment the shy maid returned—because frigging the countess was exactly what he wanted to do right now.

BELL HAD FOUND fresh sheets and re-made the bed, casting the wrinkled linen into a maid's laundry basket. With so many guests leaving, it would be difficult to discourage Button from moving into her new room this evening. The little maid was practically bouncing with excitement at her exalted new position. The poor thing would probably scrub floors if Bell asked it of her—but the maid shouldn't be asked to give up her new private chamber.

She ought to be relieved to have an excuse for not allowing Rain into her suite again. But like the foolish idiot she was, she was hunting for ways to lure him back. She knew, if he married, she'd have to leave. She'd always been cautious, but she'd come here seeking new experiences outside her level of comfort. She simply had never imagined herself to be self-destructive.

She'd donned a prettier corset this morning in hopes he might come to her rooms again. She wore her best stockings and had even indulged in his sister's perfumed soap. So when he scratched at the door in mid-afternoon, she had no excuse not to set her ledger aside and let him in.

Rainford looked as if his ice had started to crack. His eyes smoldered, and he swept her up in an embrace so fierce that she feared they'd both come undone.

"This is madness. I know better," he whispered as he kissed her cheek and down her throat. "I thought if I just knew you were here and available like my boxing gloves or shooting range, that I'd be all right. You ease my tension simply thinking about you. But *thinking* isn't what I want right now."

His very real desire thrilled her far more than his dutiful

proposals of marriage. Bell wrapped her arms around his neck and let him carry her to the bed.

“I want to say I’m doing this in hopes we are somehow helping your father,” she whispered as he lay her between the covers and started on her buttons, while she tore at his cravat. “But that would be a lie. Not a complete and total lie, but a partial one.”

“I have no such excuse.” He nipped at her ear and neck. “I have wanted you since you walked through my door and took command of my household. I still cannot fathom how someone so small and seemingly insignificant can wave a magic wand and restore order.”

She laughed at this description of her as he opened her bodice and kissed her breasts. Laughter only enhanced her desire—and his, apparently. Rain nearly tore open her pretty corset.

“You are not romantical even in passion, sir. I do adore that about you. *Small and insignificant*, indeed! Apparently I do not need flattery. Just your presence can reduce me to this silly miss aching for the caress of a man she shouldn’t have. I fear your ghosts have infected us with foolishness.” She cried out in delight as he kissed the hollow of her neck and caressed her breasts.

“We may as well be as mad as the rest of the household. I don’t think I can survive without this.” He hiked up her skirt and touched her through her drawers, rousing her to readiness.

It was still daylight. People would be looking for them soon enough. Their time together was so short. . .

Bell took him in her hands when he unfastened his trousers. His groan of pleasure was music to her ears. She could do *this* to a man who controlled a world larger than she could imagine. She loved that she was the one able to break his ice and reduce him to human instead of marquess.

They came together quickly and roughly, not hiding their cries as they quaked with pleasure. The release was exquisite. Bell wanted more. She roamed his chest while he gasped for air.

“Marry me, dammit,” he muttered. “I don’t care if the whole place goes to hell. I need this. I need you.”

She pinched his nipple. "If we heal the duke, you will have a lifetime to regret your choice. I want what Iona has. . . a love so strong that she can think of abandoning her duties and run off to Italy because her husband wishes to test his skills. I doubt that I would even follow you to London. Or that you would go as far as Edinburgh for me. And Craigmore is much more remote."

Rain kissed her nose and rolled to the side of the bed to right himself. "If you ask me right now, I think I can assure you I'd hie to Craigmore at a moment's notice as long as I knew I could have you in my bed."

Bell chuckled and sat up to tie her corset. Her nipples were engorged and still aching for his touch. "I think I can appreciate that. We need a honeymoon period where we work off all these. . . energies. . . before we can return to normal."

"Yes, that might work. Except I'm no longer certain what normal is." He turned to caress her breasts before she could finish enclosing them. "I live with chaos. You are this serene oasis where I can retreat as needed. Don't ever leave."

She couldn't promise that. She finished fastening his shirt and collar. "There will be fewer guests this evening. The doors have stopped slamming. Let's take this one day at a time. By next week, you'll most likely find my *small and insignificant* presence very boring and be ready to hie off to parts unknown."

That the doors had stopped slamming gave her icy shivers, but she wouldn't burden him with her fears.

It wasn't having his child that worried her. She knew he would do right by her, and she loved children, even if she feared she'd not be able to take care of one. Her fear was that his hysterical nagging grandmother had decided to take over any infant growing inside her.

THAT EVENING, Rainford regarded the much reduced company in

his formal drawing room in a more relaxed mood than these past few days. Or weeks or months. The parrot had escaped its cage and was even now squawking from the crystal chandelier. Victoria had the servants moving enormous pots of exotic greenery in front of the mullioned windows where the Christmas tree had been a few weeks ago. Salina had her tarot cards out and was entertaining Lady Pamela and Lady Dalrymple with their futures. And his brothers-in-law were quietly arguing over who could cut expenses most, if he understood the few phrases he caught. Nothing had really changed.

But because of the woman practicing card games with Alicia in a far corner, he had hope.

Rain realized he'd lost hope a long time ago. He'd become more and more cynical as time passed and his marriage prospects seemed less and less interesting. With his father's illness, he'd given up any expectation of finding a true match and simply attempted to find an honest woman. There for a while, after he'd proposed to Araminta, he'd felt as if he were finally moving ahead, finding his place in the scheme of things. But gradually, as he'd realized how entirely unsuitable she was, the tension had returned until he'd nearly reached a breaking point.

Now, he was expecting the intractable female who refused to marry him to restore the promise of a future. His formidable intellect must be disintegrating. He supposed he could try to change her mind about marriage. But she was right. Years of proceeding cautiously demanded time to make a *logical* decision, not one made in passion.

He didn't have time.

Abandoning her lessons, Alicia approached to take his arm. "You will play whist with us this evening, will you not? Bell has agreed, although she has some mysterious errand that prevents her from joining us directly after dinner."

"That mysterious errand is visiting the duke. She is too discreet to say so. I will be with her, so set your tables up without us. If all



goes well, we'll join you later." He'd rather take Bell back to her suite, but the dratted maid would be there.

Alicia squeezed his arm. "He'll be all right, won't he? The doors have stopped slamming. Doesn't that mean our ghostly grandmother is satisfied?"

"Or the house has settled back to normal now that there aren't numerous guests darting about. Or that Lady Pamela is a less disturbing presence than the opera singer. You may make up any reason that pleases you."

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "You resist all my best persuasion. Why is that?"

"Because I'm your brother and know when you're practicing your wiles. Behave, and I'll tell Harry to take you into dinner. He's a good, steady man. Try your wiles on him." Knowing his guests would talk if he aimed directly for Bell, Rain began working his way around the room.

Most days, he kept to himself to prevent grinding molars. But with Bell quietly talking to his sisters, magically managing his household, he relaxed enough to feel safe in his own drawing room.

No doors slammed. A servant brought a ladder, chased the parrot from the chandelier, and carried it back to its cage. The monkeys had apparently been confined for the evening. Vicki's plants looked rather handsome against the dark drapery, although Rain had his doubts that they'd survive for long there. Still, he was in a mellow mood when the dinner bell rang.

The only fly in his soup was that Bell took the arm of one of the spare male guests and didn't sit with Rain at the table, leaving him to choose among the remaining eligible ladies.

Telling himself that he was perfectly capable of carrying on dinner conversation with whomever his sisters chose to push at him, Rain chatted about dogs with one of Alicia's friends on his right. The older lady on his left wanted to know the latest remedies for toe fungus. He'd spent the better part of his life under these

conditions. He could do it.

He could do it even better knowing Bell would be waiting for him in the ducal suite afterward.

He made his excuses to the gentlemen after dinner and strode into the entry hall in hopes Bell would have already left the ladies. He almost missed seeing her in the shadows of the narrower corridors. Given that footmen were arriving with tables and chairs, Rain assumed she was directing the arrangement of the card room.

“That’s why we have Franklin, you know.” He strolled up to take her arm and lead her back to the stairs. Above the décolletage of her blue velvet evening gown, a simple stone necklace dangled above her cleavage. He admired the pearly skin and rounded curves the thin silver rested against. “You needn’t do everything.”

“Franklin is rightfully fatigued after all the exertions of dealing with your departing guests. I ordered him to sit down with a glass of medicinal brandy and his feet up. Your other servants know perfectly well what to do. They only needed to be reassured we didn’t want to do anything differently.” She wrapped her fingers around his arm and hurried him up the stairs.

“Why aren’t one of my sisters taking charge of this?”

She sent him a quizzical look. “I will not interfere if you prefer they take charge. But Estelle and Salina grow weary easily these days. Alicia is a delight with your guests, but as the youngest, she’s never had to deal with servants. And Victoria wanted to go to the nursery to check on one of the children who is feeling feverish. If it’s my task to direct servants, then it seemed easiest for me to be their go-between.”

“And here I thought Davis was efficient in keeping most household matters away from me. I simply didn’t know I had any.”

She chuckled. “If it was just you and Alicia, then one assumes you didn’t. Your sisters are accustomed to taking charge the rest of the time. But you are paying me generously, and I like to earn my keep.”

“I can’t marry you. I’ll lose the best steward I ever had! This is a

dilemma.” He opened his father’s door before she could pinch him.

The duke’s valet was back in place. There was no sign of the maid, which meant she was probably luxuriating in her new quarters. *Damn*. Yet his father looked not necessarily healthier but less gray. Rain chose to take that as a good sign, although he wasn’t sure of what.

“Did you enjoy the pudding?” Bell asked the duke as he sat up straighter with their arrival. “It’s better when the raspberries are fresh.”

“It was delicious just as it was. Whisky pudding is now my favorite treat. And better yet, it isn’t hurting me.” The duke looked hugely pleased with himself.

“It’s called *cranachan* and is about as simple as can be. We didn’t have much of a feast on Hogmanay, but we always managed the cranachan, if only using preserves.” Bell settled on the foot of the bed and waited expectantly.

“Whisky and raspberries? Why didn’t we have that at the table?” Rain gestured for the valet to help him lay the duke flat on the bed.

“Not enough preserves for that many guests. And your sisters don’t need the cream and whisky. But if the oats can be digested, they’re excellent nutrition. I had the cook beat them practically into dust in hopes they’d go down smoothly. You have a most excellent kitchen.”

She slid easily from talking of desserts to discussing the kitchen, distracting all concerned while Rain laid his hand on his father’s abdomen. This time, he didn’t use his father’s hand in between. He needed to know if he could do this on his own. He took up the discussion of favorite foods as Bell set her slender fingers on top of his.

Talking of food was done easily in a calming voice. Less boring than the morning’s discussion of anatomy, the topic was less likely to put others to sleep.

“I think I feel the warmth,” Bell whispered.

So did Rain—as well as the *energy* flow. It seemed smoother, less knotted. Not that this had any scientific methodology that he understood, but he continued in his soothing voice, recalling favorite Christmas dinners. He began to feel a harmony, like a musician must feel when he discovered notes that expressed the sounds in his head.

By the time he'd done all he knew to do, his father was asleep again. Rain had the manservant help him turn the duke on his side, then hugged Bell as he led her from the suite.

"I have no idea what I'm doing," he whispered into her hair.

"That makes two of us." She stood on her toes to kiss his cheek. "Go. You deserve a rest. I think this drains you. I'll make your excuses to Alicia."

His arms felt oddly empty as she abandoned him to slip down the stairs on her own.

He'd made a mistress of his steward. And here he'd thought he'd been the only member of the family who had risen about the Winchester eccentricity.

PLACES HAD ALREADY BEEN TAKEN at the card tables when Bell arrived. She was just the smallest bit giddy from their session with the duke. She really felt as if they might be helping, and Rain's appreciation filled her with unaccustomed warmth—from a man who was called cold!

Feeling perhaps a little too confident, she noticed an empty chair at the table where Lady Pamela and Lady Dalrymple sat with Salina's solicitor husband and Sir Harry. They didn't appear to be playing whist.

Remembering the ladies slighting her earlier, Bell deliberately approached that table. She might be quiet and unassuming, but no one had ever called her shy, and tonight, she was feeling courageous. Or rebellious. As a friend of Nevins, perhaps Lady Dalrymple could explain the regrettable episode this morning. "Shall I join you?"

The ladies looked sour. The gentlemen instantly stood, and being closest, Sir Harry pulled out a chair for her. "Do you play Brag? The others are all vicious whist players, but we're not inclined to blood-letting this evening."

She liked Sir Harry. She didn't appreciate the scowls on the ladies' faces, but they could scarcely forbid her a Brag table. The more numbers, the better when it came to this game. "I've played with my family upon occasion. Catch me up on which version?"

They explained the rules they were playing by. Bell noticed Lady Dalrymple had few coins left and Lady Pamela had accumulated the larger pot. Of course, in a game that required bluffing, an actress would have the best chance. Unfortunately for

Lady Pamela, Bell had a head for numbers, and Brag was simple. The game didn't require shuffling. The dealer merely slipped the cards beneath the deck and continued dealing.

"How is the duke this evening?" Mr. Lombard asked, chewing on an unlit cigar.

Salina's husband was a handsome enough man, despite the muttonchops. Bell wondered at his decision to sit with the unmarried ladies and Rain's bachelor friend. Or had the ladies made the decision? She really needed to learn the guests better.

"His Grace is resting easily. His valet says he has had no difficulty with today's meals. Rain thinks fattening his father will help tremendously, if we can find the right foods." Bell didn't look at her cards. Not having determined the rotation yet, she preferred to make only half bets while she learned the table.

"Sal tells me I'm fattening up too much. I'll have to take up boxing with Rain." Lombard checked his cards.

"You're playing blind, Lady Craigmores?" Sir Harry asked, placing his wager and noticing she didn't look at her cards.

"I am this round. My stepfather used to cheat, so I learned to be cautious and watch the cards first. Lady Dalrymple, your daughter is a delight. I am hiding her favorite books and making her seek them. She's quite good." And walking one small step at a time, but Bell refrained from a comment that might appear as if she were criticizing the mother's lack of nurturing.

"I'd rather someone of your sort stay away from her," the widow said stiffly, laying down her wager.

Well, so much for gratitude. Good thing she wasn't expecting it.

"My sort? You object to twins, stewards, or Scots?" Bell truly did not know what she'd done to offend the lady, but she didn't intend to take her seriously. "I'm also of the short sort, and Rainford tells me I'm a managing sort. Since he pays me to manage his household, I assume that isn't a bad thing."

"Rainford has his sisters who can manage the household. I can't think that's why he's paying you." Lady Pamela laid her wager.

Ah, so here was the one spreading evil gossip. Bell couldn't imagine how the actress might know what she and Rain had done. But she saw how the woman was winning.

Biting her tongue on saying Teddy's mistress was a fine one to talk, Bell stopped the players from revealing their cards with a warning, "Don't turn them over yet. I think the deck is old. I can spot the high cards."

To prove her point, she flipped over one card in each of their stacks, revealing Sir Harry's king, Mr. Lombard's queen, Lady Dalrymple's jester, and Lady Pamela's ace.

While the players expressed shock, overturning the rest of their cards to reveal lesser denominations, Bell gestured for the footman hovering near the tray of drinks. "Bring a new deck, please."

"Why, I never. . ." Lady Pamela huffed and pointed at her hand, which was higher than the rest. "It's my pot. You cannot say it isn't."

Lombard leaned back in his chair and frowned as he examined the deck. "Actually, I think we need to forfeit all our winnings and start over. Anyone who notices these marks would have an advantage. Thank you, Lady Craigmores, for not robbing us blind."

"I like the challenge of bluffing. Stealing is much too easy. As I said, my stepfather was a cheat, and I learned from him. Perhaps Lady Pamela knew my history and that is her objection to my joining your table?" Bell loved a good bluff. She lifted her eyebrows at the actress, waiting for an explanation.

"I will not stand to be insulted by a courtesan." The actress scooped up her winnings and left in a huff.

Bell muffled a laugh.

Lady Dalrymple merely looked bewildered at the table now empty of coins. "I thought we were to start over?"

Without comment, the gentlemen began dividing up their winnings and pushing a larger share in her direction to make up for the coins Lady Pamela had stolen.

Apparently performing her duty as hostess, Alicia joined them,

thus distracting Lady Dalrymple more.

*Courtesan*, indeed, as if the actress weren't living with Teddy. What on earth had given Lady Pamela that idea? They'd been more than discreet.

As if summoned by Bell's thoughts, Teddy left his table to join them. "Pam out of funds? If she wants me to build her theater, she really needs to start saving. I've won some, and I'm feeling lucky, if I might join you."

Lady Dalrymple brightened. "If you would, please. Lady Pamela was winning, so perhaps that's why she left while she was ahead. She's quite excited about the theater."

And if the family fortune was left to Teddy, he'd be ripe for every grasping creature who flattered him with her company. Bell winced, understanding Rain's dilemma. Would Teddy mature enough in five years if Rain married now and delayed the trust transfer?

Alicia joined Teddy in the Brag game as the whist tables they'd left rearranged themselves. Bell settled in to enjoy the company for a little while. Drucilla's mother might still disapprove of her, but the lady was so obviously bad at cards that there wasn't any chance she could play whist. Bell could, but she preferred the company of Alicia and Teddy. Eventually, Lady Dalrymple surrendered and left the table to join the guests gossiping in the other room.

By morning, no doubt all the guests would believe Bell a courtesan and a card cheat. Life took some strange turns.

Confident that the marquess's immediate family suffered under no such delusions, Bell pleaded early morning hours and left before the others. Wondering if the actress and Rainford's cousin had taken against her because she'd had Nevins thrown out, Bell took the stairs up to the nursery, holding tight to the banisters all the way. She'd promised Drucilla that she'd be nearby if needed. She hoped she hadn't been needed.

The child was huddled in a child-sized rocking chair in the



schoolroom, cuddling her doll. Did no one ever notice her leaving the room? Or were they so used to it that they'd quit fighting her?

Bell held out her hand. "You need to be in bed, silly goose. Did you see any new ghosts this evening?"

Dru tilted her head as if considering. "There's an old gentleman in funny clothes. He watches the lady. She paces like mommy does sometimes. I think she's worried."

Bell prayed that meant the nag was still on the loose. She should ask Rainford to start taking precautions before his grandmother's spirit had more notions.

Which meant she was seriously considering allowing the marquess back in her bed.

"Well, there's little we can do for them, I fear. Do you think you can sleep now?" She led the child back to the bedroom where the nursemaid had nodded off.

Dru obediently climbed into her empty bed and let Bell tuck her in. She prayed that the child would at least become accustomed to seeing spirits without fear.

Two of the youngest children had climbed into bed together. One of the older boys had thrown off his covers. Bell covered him and left the toddlers alone. At least there were no whimpering infants to fear breaking. And while they slept, she needn't worry about their noises startling her into the vapors.

She let herself out in the hall. The stairs down to her floor were on the corner, although one of the gas lamps had gone out and that end was cast in darkness. She should have brought a lamp with her, but the front stairs were so well lit. . .

She could go back that way. She probably should. But she was tired and walking half way through the main residence only to have to turn around and walk back on the next floor down. . . seemed like too much effort. She could manage in the dark and remember to bring a lamp next time. And have Franklin look into the unlit sconce.

Lifting her multi-layered dinner gown and petticoat, she started

down the corner stairs to the family floor. The north wing wasn't particularly well lit, either, but it was unoccupied and not hazardous. Rainford really could house a village in this place.

Holding her skirt in one hand and clutching the railing with the other, Bell took the stairs cautiously. Stairs always made her uncomfortable, but she'd done this so often these past weeks that she was learning to breathe a little easier. She couldn't spend her life sitting on a sofa for fear of falling—

A shove from behind sent her headfirst down the stairwell. The shock spun her senseless before she hit the landing.

RETIRED to his own suite with a glass of brandy and the latest medical journal, Rainford was in his dressing gown and slippers when he thought he heard a child's cry. Assuming a nursemaid would hush the nightmare, he flipped the page and tried to concentrate.

The cries escalated to hysterical screams. A door slammed. A cold draft riffled the pages of the journal, and ice froze his spine.

Normally, he would ignore the frisson of fear, but these past weeks had been anything but *normal*. Setting down drink and journal, he picked up a lamp and stepped into the hall. His suite was just down from the duke's on the main family floor. He'd thought most of the company had gone to bed, but he could see light flickering up from the public rooms below. More doors slammed.

The child's screaming continued. Others were emerging from their rooms. In her dressing gown and nightcap, Estelle was already aiming for the stairs.

Rain's thoughts flew to Bell, but her chambers were far on the other side of the house. If she heard a child, she'd already be heading for the nursery.

So he stopped to check on the duke. Both he and the valet were

asleep, undisturbed by the commotion.

Drunken voices echoed up from the entry hall as Rain emerged from the ducal suite and took the main stairs up. The child's incoherent cries were terrifying.

Teddy and Lady Pamela had the suite on the far end of the nursery floor, but there was no sign of life on their end. They were probably the drunken voices below.

The schoolroom door was already open when Rain reached it.

Drucilla stood in the middle of the schoolroom, shrieking and looking at something above her head. Estelle tried to approach, but the child backed off and pointed. The governess, nursemaids, and children in their nightgowns surrounded her, but she stuck out her hands and swirled around to avoid anyone reaching for her.

Upon Rain's entrance, the child flung herself at his legs, weeping and crying what sounded like, "Lady See, see, see."

The ice that had frozen his spine threatened his heart as Rain followed the child's pointing finger.

Floating ethereally above the child's head, unseen by anyone else, was Bell, still in her dinner gown.

He could swear she was whispering *Help me, help me.*

Rain's heart dropped to his slippers. He'd seen her like this once before—when she'd been in bed dreaming. Was this part of her dream?

Unable to tell the others what he was seeing without sounding as hysterical as the child, Rain swept Drucilla up and handed her over to Estelle. "Lady C, Lady Craigmores. I'll check on her."

He used a calm voice he did not feel to send the weeping child back to bed.

And then he set off for Bell's suite in the north wing.

Carrying his lamp high, he took the route she would most likely take had she stopped at the nursery for any reason. He noted the unlit sconce, but his light revealed nothing out of the ordinary. He might take this floor to the far end and the servants stairs, but the slamming doors and unlit sconce had raised his hackles.

He started down, praying to find Bell in her chamber, dreaming.

At the sight of her crumpled and unconscious on the landing, Rain roared his anguish.

When he kneeled down beside her, a voice that wasn't hers spoke through her lips. *She was pushed.*

HEART RIPPING FROM HIS CHEST, arms filled with his lifeless burden, Rain shoved open a door of the ducal suite. Estelle rushed over in a flurry of exclamations.

“Rain, you can’t take her in there. That’s mother’s chamber,” she whispered worriedly.

“And *grandmother’s*.” With Bell’s beautiful eyes closed and her wicked intelligence silent, Rain operated on sheer terror and instinct. Elbowing his sister aside, he gestured for his father’s valet to yank back the covers of a bed that hadn’t been used in decades. “Right now, our grandmother seems to be occupying Bell.”

Estelle exclaimed some more and hurried to place herself between him and his patient so she might undo Bell’s clothing. “Why does she not wake?”

If he were to believe a spirit voice, because *someone had pushed Bell down the stairs*. Or startled her into fainting, which would have the same effect. He had to protect her. “She fell down the stairs. She has a weak heart,” he heard himself saying instead. “And if I must nurse two patients, I want them near each other.”

That shut up his sister. It wouldn’t shut up all the other flapping tongues gathering outside the door, awakened by the child’s screams and his own resounding fury.

Rain was so far beyond furious that he feared melting all his brain cells. The cold chill down his spine probably negated the fury heating his skull. If he thought in nonsense terms, maybe he could survive searching Bell’s delicate frame for internal injuries.

She breathed. After a careful inspection on the stairs, he hadn’t found any broken bones, although that was a miracle given the

angle he'd found her at. Her etheric projection, or whatever one called it, hadn't followed him from the nursery as far as he knew. He hoped the child's silence meant that hysterical vision wasn't still hovering upstairs.

His grandmother's harsh voice had spoken only those few words. He was shattering inside trying to decide how to handle this. Why would anyone push Bell?

Bell did not wake to tell him. Could her soul really leave her body while she lived?

Estelle efficiently pushed everyone from the room, ordering someone to fetch the countess's maid and another to bring tea. Rain had no idea who would drink tea at midnight. He'd prefer brandy. But if it removed everyone from the room, he didn't care if they ordered horse manure.

He unfastened the remainder of Bell's hooks in a professional manner, not in the white hot heat of lust. He untied her corset and gestured for the valet to bring him his medical bag. With a stethoscope, Rain verified the stutter in her heart rhythm that he'd suspected. But she'd been living with this all her life. It might cause her to faint, but it shouldn't cause unconsciousness.

Bell's maid arrived, anxiously wringing her hands.

"Help me undress her." He gestured at the valet. "Go back to my father. Don't let anyone in but me. Take the tray from Estelle when she arrives."

*She was pushed.*

How much did he trust a ghost?

Despite Button's shocked objections, Rain helped her undress her mistress, leaving on chemise and drawers for decency. Bell's courageous spirit didn't waken.

This was what she feared—unconsciousness, her mind open and empty, allowing the haunts to enter her—or apparently, for her spirit to depart her body. And Bell was the only one who could tell him how to fix it.

The tea arrived. Now that suspicion ran rampant in his

panicked mind, he didn't dare feed anything prepared by others to her even if she woke. How much could he tell that to Bell's new maid?

*Why Bell?* What had Bell ever done to anyone that they might want to harm her? It made no sense. He must be mad to listen to ghosts.

But it was possible his grandmother's spirit had helped him find the healing talent in his voice. Did that make *him* mad?

He ordered Button to sleep in the suite's salon so she'd be close by. Pulling up a chair beside the bed, Rain held Bell's hand and prayed as he hadn't in years. He prayed aloud, so his healing voice might reach her, even though he hadn't her enhancing ability to help. When she didn't stir, he began reciting all the idle hopes and dreams he had for someday changing his part-time medical practice to create a clinic and bring in more professionals. It wasn't a plan he'd ever voiced.

Thinking perhaps she'd stirred, if only a little bit, Rain continued speaking in his calmest, most patient-friendly tones, talking about hoping his father might live to be a hundred. Rain had only just turned thirty-four in November. He had too many things he wanted to do on his own before he was ready to take over the stultifying tasks of his father's home and position. He poured out all his thoughts, even some he hadn't dare think on his own.

He knew people called him Ice King. He'd learned to be cold and efficient to counterbalance his family's eccentricities and keep his estate running in a manner that allowed him to continue his medical practice. If he became duke, he'd turn into an automaton. And if he had to do so without the trust income, whoever he might have become would not survive at all.

If he lost Bell. . .

It did not bear thinking. He'd finally found a woman who grasped what he needed when even he didn't know, a woman who matched his intelligence, and didn't cower in his presence. He'd

never find another.

He'd always thought love a complication, what was expected of him as son and brother. He was fairly sure he loved his family, or he would have killed them all at one time or another, instead of grinding his molars to nubbins.

But whatever this was he felt for Bell went well beyond accepting frailties and into a wider realm that allowed him to hope for a future where he might actually be *content*, for the first time in years. Bell actually made him happy. And lustful and terrified, admittedly.

Her quiet assurance and loving acceptance had the Ice King believing in wives, children, and love instead of chains and shackles. He desperately wished to do the same for her. What would it take to make Bell happy? If he spoke those words, would she wake?

Rain hadn't found the right promises to wake her before he dozed off in the chair, still holding her hand. A slight movement of her fingers alerted him. Heart leaping, he squeezed her hand gently.

"I'm back," she whispered, sounding puzzled.

Rain tried not to startle her. Sitting still, stroking her palm and wrist, he merely whispered, "Thank all that is holy." His intense relief was making him light-headed.

"Not sure your grandmother is holy," she murmured, inexplicably. "Did I imagine it, or did I fall down the stairs?"

"My grandmother says you were pushed." He said it questioningly, unable to believe it. He'd thought perhaps the child might have started screaming first, toppling Bell with startlement. He didn't want to believe someone had tried to kill her.

She went quiet but her fingers around his were steady.

"I think she's right. The light was out, so I was holding on and being very cautious. I don't remember being startled until I felt a shove at my back. It could have been a spectral push, I suppose. Your grandmother is good at slamming doors. But I can't imagine



why a ghost or anyone else would hate me.”

“Spectral shoves were not on my list of possibilities. Thanks for that addition.” Rain straightened his stiffening back. “Just in case this is a more human problem, let’s be safe. I want to keep you here, with people I trust to watch over you. I want time to determine if anyone appears guilty or acting out of character or anything that might give me a clue.”

And he’d have to have her maid oversee all her meals from kitchen to table. Damn.

She squeezed his fingers, then removed her hand from his. “I caught Lady Pamela at cheating, and Lady Dalrymple dislikes me for reasons I don’t understand. Perhaps she learned I had Nevins removed. None of that seems reason enough to kill me.”

“I’ll start questioning in the morning,” he said with murder in mind.

*She could have died.*

He could have lost her forever.

Now was probably not the time to pour out his undying love and admiration. He needed time to adjust his thinking, to determine when was the best time and the best way to ask this amazing woman to marry him—in a *romantic* way. There wasn’t any certainty that she’d agree. He couldn’t fail at this, so he’d plan—while casting all the castle’s reprobates into the snow.

BELL WAS LOSING BADLY to the duke in a game of chess when a knock at the door of the suite sent Button scurrying to answer it. They’d worked out a system where the maid peered around the door, while the duke’s manservant stood beside it, wielding a fire iron. Per instructions, Button insisted the visitor couldn’t enter.

“Why can’t I visit my uncle? I’ve seen Rain in there. This is outrageous! How am I to know how he’s faring? He could be dead for all I know, and you’re covering it up.” Teddy’s voice rang

clearly from the hall.

Lady Pamela's was less clear but still audible. "See, I told you. Rainford is keeping something from you. And why is a maid in there and not you?"

Bell grimaced. Then she gestured at the bowl of nearly liquid oats on the table, distracting the duke from the quarrel. "It's filled with cream and brown sugar. Eat it. You need to be plump and healthy when you walk out of here."

His Grace grunted and gave her one of his acerbic looks, but he took a spoonful while the couple outside argued with Button. The valet finally stepped in, closed the door, and locked it.

"I wager ten minutes until Alicia arrives to see if she's allowed in." Bell wrote her bet on the paper they'd been using.

"It will take Teddy fifteen to find her. I'll give it ten minutes before *Delahey* arrives. The women will have already alerted him." The duke scribbled his wager beside hers.

"I cannot imagine how Rain plans to hold them off much longer. Is he interrogating the guests as to where they were last night? We were everywhere. It's not possible." Other than painful bruising, Bell felt fine, but Rainford had refused to bring up her ledgers or anything resembling work.

"Maybe he's waiting for your ghosts to speak. Or he's hypnotized them. I've been wondering if that's what his voice does. I must say it's quite effective, whatever he's doing. With your help," the duke added politely.

His words were music to her ears. If the duke might live. . . she might build castles in the air. "I simply exist, in the same manner as your son's hand. Rain is the one with the voice and the knowledge. Hypnosis is an interesting theory." She moved her queen and hoped for the best.

"Call the girls in and have one of their séances. See if the ghosts know who pushed you. You can't be held prisoner in here forever. I'm enjoying the company, but you're young and should be out enjoying life." He cornered her king.

“And I’m a very bad chess player, and you’d like someone like Lord Delahey who can challenge you. We could teach Button and your man to play whist. I’m much better at that.” Bell moved the playing pieces back in place, ignoring his reference to a séance.

“You’re afraid a séance will raise my wife’s ghost to scold you for using her chambers,” he taunted, not distracted from his point. “What if the spirits could tell you the guilty party?”

“They can’t. They don’t know our names, apparently. We should see if a preacher might do an exorcism. Spirits should move on to peace.” And not speak through her.

A knock interrupted their dispute.

“Well, that was faster than I expected.” The duke checked the watch he’d left on the table to time their wagers. “Since we both said ten minutes, is the winner the one who guesses the right person?”

“No, we both lose because we guessed the time wrong. I’m not losing all my wages to your wily ways.” Bell gestured for him to take the first move.

Both Alicia *and* Delahey argued to be allowed in.

“You should write them a note we can pass through the crack, tell them you’re being held prisoner and that they must climb the walls and rescue you,” Bell suggested.

The duke cackled.

Silence abruptly reined at the door.

“Papa?” Alicia finally called. “Is everything all right?”

“Your brother has run mad like all the rest of you. So I’d say everything is fine.” The duke moved his pawn.

Bell chuckled at the quiet consultation outside the door. Rain had gone a little bit mad, but then, she wasn’t exactly pleased that someone had presumably attempted to kill her. Of course, if it had been a ghost, then she wasn’t safe even in here.

“WHAT THE DEVIL IS GOING ON?” Delahey entered Rain’s study in the imperious manner he no doubt used in parliament. Nearing forty, still handsome enough but growing soft in the middle, Victoria’s husband had experience in throwing around his considerable weight. “The women are all aflutter and Teddy is swearing the duke died and you aren’t telling anyone.”

“Where were you last evening and who are your witnesses?” Rain had a chart laid out on his desk. He didn’t wish to accuse anyone without proof of guilt, but if he could narrow his list of suspects, he’d simply have them removed from the house.

He prayed the list wouldn’t include anyone in his family. He’d not only have a hard time heaving them out, but he’d have an even worse time believing it of them. He had to strengthen the wall he kept between himself and others until this matter was settled.

If he couldn’t keep Bell safe, he’d have to send her away. A piece of him died each time he thought of that. So he wouldn’t think it. He’d find the culprit first.

“Tell me what’s happening, and I’ll give you my answer,” Delahey countered. “You’re the one who wasn’t anywhere about last night.”

“I was in my room or I wouldn’t have to ask. I have two patients on my hands this morning, and I don’t want a third. Make my life easier, please, and simply answer my questions. The alternative is that I send the whole damned family and company home.”

Delahey frowned and settled into one of the leather chairs. “Victoria wouldn’t leave if she thought the duke in danger. You’d

have to tie her up and toss her out. I'll give you a list of everyone in the card party and their approximate time of departure, if that will help. You can compare to what others say. Now will you tell me?"

Bell would tell him that he couldn't do everything himself. Grudgingly accepting the need for help, Rain explained as carefully as he could without making a gullible idiot out of himself. Delahey listened with a frown at the ghostly warning. But he appeared appalled at mention of the countess mysteriously falling down stairs.

With the conciseness of a trained observer, his brother-in-law gave a clear picture of the card party.

Rain jotted notes and drew up a chart. "Stay here while I call for Victoria and let her verify this. Then I'll need someone who was in the drawing room to confirm the various early arrivals from the card room and when they left the drawing room." Rain pulled the rope and had a footman hunt for his sister.

"It's possible the countess is simply an hysteric or playing on your sympathies," Delahey suggested as they waited.

Rain pierced him with a withering glare. "I think I'm a better judge of character than that. Did the countess ever give you the impression of being a fool?"

"Quite the opposite. I simply wanted to be certain you're being clear-headed. It makes no logical sense to harm her from all I can tell, unless there is something wrong with your books, and they fear she's discovered it. Then every servant in the household is suspect, and we're going about this all wrong."

Rain rubbed his temples at the notion of widening his list of suspects instead of narrowing it. His molars couldn't take it any longer.

Victoria bustled in, verified Bell had been sitting with Teddy, Alicia, Harry, Lady Dalrymple, and Lombard, and even drew a diagram of the whist tables so they could place who was where when the tables changed over.

“Sal retired to the drawing room when Alicia left the table. She can tell you who was in there. I saw Lady Pamela leave in a huff. I don’t know if she went upstairs or not. And I believe Helen ran out of coins and went into the drawing room before the game was over.”

“There’s no chance Nevins could have returned and been hiding somewhere?” Rain made notes. “He’s the one who insulted Bell.”

“He’s a particular friend of Helen’s, but I cannot imagine she’d risk your favor by doing such a thing. She’s really not very bright and needs your protection. Have you looked at her daughter’s leg? I’m afraid she may have hired a quack to fix it.” Victoria examined the chart Rain handed her and nodded approval.

“I shall have to do so, I suppose. If it hadn’t been for Drucilla, Bell might have been on those steps all night or longer. Thank you both. If Sal was in the drawing room, can you send her in to me?”

“When may we see the duke?” his sister demanded.

“I’d let you in right now, but then everyone else would ask the same. Can you wait until I have some notion of what I’m dealing with? He really is doing better, and Bell is keeping him entertained, for the moment.”

His sister didn’t like it, but Delahey led her out, reassuring her that they’d be at the bottom of this matter shortly. Rain wished he felt so confident.

The problem was—he had to condemn a friend or family member—or one of his staff!—someone they trusted. Unless, of course, he believed a ghost had pushed Bell. Rain stripped off his coat and lifted his weights while he pondered his next move. He really needed Bell to interrogate the servants.

Teddy barged in before Rain could work off enough steam to deal with him with appropriate composure. He wanted to bounce the brat out and teach him to knock.

“I want to marry Pamela.” Teddy flung himself down in the chair Delahey had vacated. “How large a settlement can I have if we remove ourselves to London? We’ll need a flat.”

“You’d rather marry a penniless actress than present yourself on the marriage mart?” Rain gave the weights one more swing before settling into his desk chair. “What brought this on?”

“She said it’s the only way she’ll stay as my model. She’s a perfect model. She doesn’t sit there like a cardboard cutout but can act any part I need.” Teddy looked petulant. “Name me a wealthy lady who can do that.”

“Any actress can do that if you pay them. Marry a wealthy lady and you can have a different actress every week. Be sensible for once in your life, Ted. Marriage is forever. Once you remove to London, Lady Pamela will wish to return to the stage. Modeling cannot be as exciting as the theater.”

“I promised her a theater of her own. I *am* being sensible. I need an art gallery that brings better prices for my work, and they’re in London. Investors for a theater are in London. If I don’t have to pay a model, I’ll earn more. I’ve thought it all out.”

Rainford rubbed the crease forming between his eyes. “If you have to pay for a flat instead of living here for free, you’ll go bankrupt in a year. And flats are as likely to have strange spirits to haunt you as country houses. Live in Sommersville and just travel into the city as needed. The place is sitting there empty, draining the coffers.”

“Pam wants to live in the city.” Teddy frowned and rubbed his hands on his knees. “But Sommersville. . . I know the haunts there. They might add an interesting effect. . .”

He got up and wandered out. Rainford closed his eyes, picked up a weight, and considered flinging it into the wall.

While Rain waited for Salina to put in an appearance, Franklin rapped at the study door. “Lord and Lady Ives to see you, my lord.” The butler held out the silver salver bearing a card.

“Gerard? Gerard is here? What in hell—” Dropping the weight he was lifting, Rainford reached for his coat.

Bell’s sister arriving could not be a good sign, but he had to admit, having someone not part of the household to lend a hand

would be a relief. He thought.

Iona's voice was already carrying through the entry hall. Neither of his visitors was likely to wait on ceremony.

"Watch out, Rainford, she's worked up a full head of steam!" Gerard's booming voice carried easily, as did his laughter at his new bride.

Still struggling into his coat, Rain exited his office and met his guests at the stairs. Gerard Ives wasn't as tall as Rain but broader, with the usual Ives dark head of hair. His wife was Bell's twin, although Rain could readily see the difference between quiet Bell and Iona, who tended to buzz busily like the bees she raised.

"What on earth brought you out in this weather? I thought you'd be on your way to Italy by now." Rain gestured for them to enter the small drawing room.

Iona resisted. "Where's Bell? The aunts telegraphed us of trouble. I want to see my sister."

The blasted prescient aunts. . . who had sent Bell here in the first place.

Alicia popped out of the music room, where she'd no doubt been listening. "I can take you up. She's entertaining our father while he recuperates. Lord Ives, a pleasure to see you again." She bounced a curtsy. "You and Rain can have a nice chat—"

"Capital try, baby sister." Rain held up his hand. "If I let you in, then I have to let in the entire household. Go back to your piano. I'll show them up."

Alicia stuck her tongue out at him as if she were still five-years old. Lady Ives looked alarmed. Trying to hold himself together when he felt as if he were cracking down the middle, Rain gestured at the stairs. "Lady Craigmore is doing fine. I'll take you to her."

"If you're not letting anyone in to see her. . . In where? Was there really some sort of trouble?" Gerard didn't sound overly concerned as he trailed after his wife, who was practically racing up the marble stairway as if she knew where she was going.

"It depends on whether you believe spirit voices." Rainford



knew the earl was a Malcolm as well as an Ives and not only believed in the family weirdnesses, but had a few of his own. He simply preferred to sound sane when he talked with someone outside his family.

Lady Ives cried her sister's name, and the duke's door flew open. Despite all warnings, Bell ran to greet her sister. The twins hugged and cried and laughed and retreated into the ducal suite, closing the door behind them.

"Would you care to join them or would you prefer a glass of brandy and a little common sense?" Rain asked politely.

Gerard snorted in derision. "A hen fest or your fine brandy? Difficult choice." Knowing his way around the castle, he turned around and headed back to Rain's study.

AFTER INTRODUCING her twin to the duke, Bell retreated to the elegant bedchamber Rain had ordered her to stay in. "Did the aunts truly telegraph you *before* I was hurt?"

Iona took off her hat and shook out her still too-short blond curls, fluffing them with her fingers. "They weren't specific. They simply said danger, and I made poor Gerard rush us to the train station. You don't look too injured."

"It's still a ridiculous journey on the basis of very little," Bell scolded. "And I escaped with little more than bruising, although it could have been worse. I had one of my comatose spells, and apparently an entity declares I was pushed down the stairs. For all I know, the entity did it. We have one who slams doors."

"Then we must take you away from here immediately!" Alarmed, Iona refused to sit.

"And go where?" Bell took a chair. Her bruises ached too much to stand for long. "Do you know of any place that is without spirits? I cannot run from myself."

With a sigh of disgruntlement, Iona dropped into the other

chair by the fire. "I rather hoped the Ice King would freeze any ghost daring to show itself."

Bell gestured for Button to bring them tea. She actually had a use for a personal maid! It seemed rather incredible. She'd prefer to be back at her books, but not while her sister visited.

"Rainford is not as icy as he seems, I'll warn you. He's like your husband in that. They assume the airs society expects of their positions, but underneath. . ."

Iona's eyes widened. "He's a raging fire of passion? I sensed that in Gerard. I must get closer to Rainford. He always seemed simply cold."

"I wouldn't say raging fire." Amused, Bell accepted her cup from the maid. "The marquess is not mercurial or romantic or easy to anger. He is a physician, after all, and he's developed this supernaturally calm voice that even woke me when I was comatose. I'd call him more. . . intense."

"You're in love with him!" Iona exclaimed, then silenced as she considered this development.

"I did not say that," Bell argued. In love with a man who already had a houseful of ghosts and eccentrics? It seemed unlikely. "I admire him." Well, she'd gone to bed with him, so perhaps she more than admired him.

She wasn't telling her sister that. "But now that you've mentioned it. . . Perhaps you can obtain a better sense of the guests than I can. My gift for ghosts is essentially useless, but if you could determine who might want to harm me. . ."

"Hmmm." Iona sipped her tea, distracted from her matchmaking. "I've never attempted to deliberately determine character or guilt or whatever you're asking. That's not a simple matter like smelling happiness or anger. I'm not sure how it would work."

"Start with Lady Pamela and Lady Dalrymple. They seem displeased with me. After that, I have no notion of who might wish me ill, and I'll have to believe I simply stumbled."

“Is there any chance that you have learned, or might learn, something from your position that has worried someone? What about Rainford? Could he actually—”

Bell cut off her twin with a vigorous head shake. “No. Not possible. Aside from the fact that I only keep household books, it’s not in his nature to so much as murder an insect. He’s forceful, but in a quiet way. He’s very much lord of all he surveys. He is of the sort who would find a much more devious means of shutting me up, if needed. Only, his intended ran off with his steward, and he made it easier for them, not harder. He is not cruel or vengeful.”

“What about the other family members? His heir? Perhaps his heir fears Rainford will marry you and cut off his expectations.” Iona nibbled a crumpet.

Bell wrinkled her nose. “You can test Teddy, I suppose. He’s an artist and a bit helpless. Rainford’s family is unconventional, but I don’t see any harm in them.”

A door slammed.

Bell winced—but she didn’t feel faint.

Another door slammed. That was quite the outside of enough.

The ghost wanted to speak—again.

She was accustomed to sitting still, shutting out spirits, and letting others regulate how much of real life came to her so she would not be set upon by her own head. She’d come to Yates Castle in hopes of taking baby steps away from that cocoon and into the real world. She refused to be pushed into retreat, or to let Iona set up a barrier to protect her. She’d be back in her cocoon if she allowed her fear of the ghost—or anything else—to intimidate her.

Determined to face her fear, Bell set down her teacup. “Button, will you go up to the nursery and see if Drucilla might join us here?”

The maid bobbed a curtsy and hurried on her errand.

Iona regarded her warily. “And Drucilla is whom?”

“Lady Dalrymple’s very young daughter. She sees ghosts. She’s

too young to understand what she sees, but she's seen the entity slamming doors." If only Bell had any inkling of how to make this work. . .

By the time she had explained all that had been happening, Button returned with the five-year old. Drucilla did not seem in the least awed by the duchess's elegant bedchamber. She merely looked relieved when she saw Bell.

"The lady is angry again," the child said a little more confidently than she had in the past.

"Perhaps she is upset about something. Is your leg hurting from the stairs?" Bell crossed the chamber to pick up the child. She was little more than skin and bones.

"A little. Why is the lady upset?" Dru settled down in Bell's lap as if she belonged there.

"That's what we need to find out. Lady Ives, this is Drucilla Dalrymple. Dru, you needn't curtsy to Lady Ives this time, but greet her politely, say *Pleased to meet you, my lady.*"

The child buried her face in Bell's shoulder but obediently repeated the greeting.

"She's frightened and in pain," Iona said, apparently reading the child's scent.

"See, that's the sort of thing you can tell us if you mingle with the guests. I can only surmise. For instance, the doors have stopped slamming. I have to assume our lady ghost is expecting us to reach out to her." Bell grimaced at the thought. "But I don't *know* anything."

"Well, I don't know anything either. I am making assumptions when I call a scent fear. How does one talk with a ghost?"

"Apparently one holds a séance, I hypnotize myself into unconsciousness, and the ghost moves in. I'm not enamored of the process. I would like to develop a better system." Bell hugged the child in her lap, who now nibbled a biscuit Button had provided. "Do you only see the lady when she's slamming doors?"

"She's over there now, walking back and forth." Dru pointed at

the unoccupied side of the chamber.

Iona froze with her teacup half way to her lips.

Bell tried to see what the child did but couldn't. "The ghost apparently doesn't know names. I can't simply ask who pushed me. I'm not certain what I can do."

"She's coming closer." Dru crushed closer to Bell in fear.

"Did the temperature just drop?" Iona glanced around, then tasted her tea. "I think the tea got colder."

Bell shivered and held Dru, not knowing how to face an entity she couldn't see.

Dru shrieked as an icy hand seemed to fall upon them and the suffocating atmosphere descended.

*Bring them together* Bell heard herself say in a voice not her own.

Iona added her shrieks to Dru's.

RAIN PACED his father's sitting room after the child had been returned to the nursery. "*Bring them together.* . . What in hell does that mean? Pardon my language," he added with a weary wave. "*Who* together? When, why, where. . . ?"

Bell played a card at the table they'd set up for whist. Rain wanted to ask how she could sit there so calmly when even the family ghosts worried about her. But he thought she used her formidable mind as a barrier between her ghosts and the real world. He should let her build that barrier instead of disturbing her, but he couldn't do that and protect her too. Not without locking her in an ivory tower, anyway.

"If I could speak ghost, I would tell you," she said. "Although if this is your grandmother, one assumes she means bring the family together. I could be wrong."

"Put everyone in one room and interrogate them?" Rain was all for that, using cudgels, if necessary. He just didn't think it would work.

"Before dinner, I tested everyone in the drawing room." Iona drew a card from the deck. "If we trust in scents, there's a good deal of worry and concern, but that could be about His Grace." She nodded at the duke, who studied his cards and didn't draw another. "I particularly tested Lady Pamela and Lady Dalrymple, but there isn't much I can tell you. The actress smells of avarice, but she's poor and you're rich, and that's fairly natural. Lady Dalrymple. . . is a little vacant, like a pretty flower with no scent. The ghost should try to occupy *her*."

"Or maybe an entity has and used her to push Bell," Gerard

suggested.

In response, Iona slapped a card on the table, expressing her displeasure at the supernatural event that had caused the duke's salon to turn icy and Bell to speak while still awake.

Rain wanted to slap more than cards. His frustration level had reached new heights, even for him.

"My gift for reading objects seems to be only for ancient history." Gerard recorded points on the scorecard. "I know the journals say it's possible to read recent events on objects, but so far, I've not found that true. Perhaps if a killer threw a rock, I might read his anger on the rock, but we have no weapon."

"We're working on the Roman ruin we've found on the estate." Iona followed her husband's change of topic. "But even there, we can't feel much. It's as if the passion has to be very deep to sink into the stones for us to read."

"So I should bring Bell to the drawing room and let people throw stones at her?" Rain gloomily paced the salon.

"Well, that would bring people together," Bell said pertly.

Rain knew better. She was angry beneath that pleasant smile.

He desperately wanted to keep her safe with him, but he couldn't if she was in danger from someone—or something—in his household. "Should I send you back to Wystan with your sister?"

"Wystan has more ghosts than here, I'm sure. It's much older." Bell laid out her winning hand as if she hadn't a worry in the world. "See, I told you I'm much better at whist than chess."

"You're taking advantage of a sick old man," the duke grumbled. "I should be given a handicap."

Bell hooted inelegantly. "The way you gave me a handicap in chess? Besides, you are looking much better this evening. I think the diet Rain has set for you is helping."

And they had Bell's psychic ability to thank for the duke's appetite returning. How could Rain possibly pay back all the good she had done? Even if he could persuade her to marry him, he couldn't drop everything and run off with her. He had a bad

feeling she wouldn't be safe here, with his family and their ghosts.

Bell pushed from the table and stood. She wore a fairly conservative gold gown, but she appeared a radiant sun to him, and his longing to have his arms around her multiplied. He'd never be able to sleep in her bed as long as she was trapped in the duke's suite.

As if she had spent this past hour making a decision, Bell caught his eye and spoke calmly, with only a hint of resignation. "I think the ghost has used every ounce of her strength to manifest, leaving her unable to speak much."

Gerard quit shuffling the cards. Iona stopped pouring tea. Rain swallowed hard and refrained from interrupting. Bell so seldom put herself and her gift forward that it seemed imperative to pay attention.

"I think she wants us to all gather in one place so she can show us who the guilty party is. I may have to give a séance to help her."

Rain could see how pale she was at the end of this announcement. "No, let me—"

She held up her hand. "As far-fetched as it seems, if the motive is as I surmise, you may be the next to be harmed. I cannot live with anyone else being hurt. I have to do this. And we need to prepare the room to catch our suspect."

The room erupted in questions.

"YOU DON'T HAVE to do this." Rain held her so close, Bell could feel the beat of his heart. "They're my bloody relations, not yours."

The duke had gone to bed. Iona and her husband had left to set up the séance with Rain's sisters. They were stealing these few minutes for themselves.

"I'm tired of staying quiet, and I can't hide anymore," she tried to explain. "I hated when I had to hide." She didn't think quite so



clearly when Rain held her like this. “I want to sleep in my own lovely suite and go back to work playing with numbers and enjoying the company of your family. I refuse to be driven out by fear. I did that once, when I ran from my stepfather. I’m simply not doing it again.”

“Sending you away for your own safety isn’t the same.”

She shook her head. “We have two possible motivations for the attack, both rather far-fetched, which may mean if there is a culprit, they’re not very bright. For instance, one of the ladies eligible for your attentions may consider me a threat. As far as I’m aware, only Lady Pamela and Lady Dalrymple suspect me of being your paramour. They would have to be seriously foolish to believe you’d marry your mistress.”

“I’d marry you in a minute! And they cannot conceivably believe I’d marry them, even if they bludgeoned me to an altar,” he argued with a hint of humor. “But if anyone else believes their gossip. . .”

“As I said, the notion that I stand in the way is far-fetched but your title is a motivation if someone is desperate enough. I cannot imagine Teddy even considering the responsibility of a title. He’s likely to inherit the fortune without the responsibility, so it would have to be a woman who thinks you’ll marry her, which makes little sense. A title without a fortune is an empty promise. Everyone must know you need a son to keep the trust, and Helen and Pamela are older than I am. It’s a gamble to think they might easily produce a son in a few short years. That would seem to indicate a younger lady with a reckless streak. I don’t think your sisters invited any such creature.”

“I’ll have a servant positioned near each female this evening, but I cannot think a séance will have them leaping up to confess. The whole notion is extraordinary,” he protested.

Bell leaned her head against his shoulder. “You’ll need a servant to stand beside every guest, including the male ones. But in my experience, it is money that brings out the worst in people.”

“Which brings us back to the damned trust,” he agreed, shoving his hand through his hair and leaving it deliciously rumpled.

Bell tilted her head to admire the effect and tried not to go faint with desire. She had to survive a séance first. “The trust is the other motivation I mentioned. If that is somehow the reason for the attack, you are in as much danger as I am. And that puts the suspicion squarely on Teddy again and is even more difficult to believe since he already stands to inherit.”

“Lady Dalrymple’s brother in New York is in line after Teddy,” Rain warned. “I checked the family tree. It has to be traced back several dukes, but he’s the eldest son of the next eldest son after my father’s line. So Teddy might be in equal danger.”

“A weak person like Helen trying to kill us all is about as unlikely as one of your family thinking they might control Teddy and the fortune if you are out of the way. And neither have anything to do with me. We may as well believe a ghost pushed me.”

“Which may bring us back to Lady Pamela, simply because she’s not family, ” he said reluctantly. “Teddy claims he wants to marry her. I’ve tried to dissuade him. But like everyone else, she believes the duke is at death’s door. She has to think Teddy will inherit soon. Why would she attack you?”

“Spite?” Bell suggested. “Because she’s afraid you’ll suddenly call in a minister and marry me on the spot? She’s not as stupid as Lady Dalrymple. She has to know you’re not likely to do that, and even if you did, there is still a chance of Teddy gaining the fortune if I don’t produce a son.”

“It’s not stupid to think I’d marry you on the spot. But I’d rather heave her out and Teddy with her to prevent you setting yourself up as a target. The likelihood that you might draw out a confession is about as unlikely as all our theories.” Rain’s jaw muscles set in determination. “I’ll tell everyone the duke is recovered. That should throw a spoke in the culprit’s wheel.”

“And you’d still attempt to crush a confession out of your

guests.” She knew she’d hit close to the truth when he growled a protest. “As much as I’d like to see you crush Lady Pamela and her wicked tongue, I don’t want you thinking badly of Teddy if he’s innocent. It’s time I use my gift as it was intended.” Despite all her doubts, she knew this had to be done.

“It doesn’t seem worth the risk. What if your heart stops and doesn’t start again? Let me try healing you first.” Rain crushed her tighter against him.

She was grateful for his physical support and perhaps for his rationality, but she needed his belief that she could do this. “What are the chances I can enhance your abilities while you’re attempting to heal me? You need time to explore what you can do, and we don’t have time. We don’t know anything for certain. My assailant might even attack the duke if they think he’s healing. It would be so simple to put a poisonous herb in his drink—”

Rain shuddered. “I hate thinking like that.”

A knock interrupted.

“It’s time, my lady,” Button called from the other side of the door. Even the maid sounded solemn and worried.

They’d pegged down as many details as was possible. Everyone would be keeping an eye on everyone else. Bell feared the spirits more than she did the human villain, especially if Lady Pamela was the culprit. Lady Pamela was easily defeated, but who could control any spirits she might let loose?

But terror was her only weapon. She prayed it would work.

“Have Mrs. Damon bring Drucilla down to the drawing room, will you, please, Button?” Bell gathered up her shawl, lifted her chin, and waited for Rainford to open the door and let her out.

“Must we include the child? It cannot be safe.” The normally unruffled marquess appeared very ruffled, indeed.

“She’ll be safe in our arms.” Bell hoped that wasn’t a lie. “If anything supernatural occurs, Dru will see and scream. Secondly, she can tell me what she sees the ghost doing, which might be important. Thirdly, she helped your grandmother speak without

rendering me comatose. It's still not pleasant, but I'd rather not end up senseless again."

"I do not like this," he warned. "I mean to fling you over my shoulder and flee with you if I perceive any threat."

She supposed it was comforting to know he cared, but that didn't assuage her terror of what she was about to unleash.

Rather than gripping the banister as she usually did, Bell took comfort in clinging to Rain's muscled arm as they descended the entry stairs. The family, guests, and servants had gathered at her request in the large drawing room. She was quite likely to make a quivering ass of herself in front of everyone he knew. And even if she succeeded in speaking to a ghost, she would still create a spectacle—and have people begging to talk to their long-dead family members.

She knew of no other way to protect herself and Rain's family—unless she retreated to Craigmore. Every ounce of her soul resisted returning to her desolate estate after the life and liveliness of Rain's active household.

Besides, she could not leave Rain and his family in danger, which seemed to be what his grandmother was saying.

So she held up her chin as she entered the towering hall. Conversation died and every head in the place turned to watch her on Rainford's arm. She refused to quake, wondering if a killer watched, if someone hated her that much.

Alicia, bless her heart, had set up a table in front of the roaring fire, far away from the crystal chandelier. There was no room large enough to comfortably allow this audience to spread out that didn't have a chandelier.

Treating her with the respect afforded a royal princess, Rainford set her down in a comfortable chair beside the table. Bell hadn't coached him in what to say. He knew more about public speaking than she did.

While he addressed his guests, she busied herself with locating all her prime suspects. The family was all here, naturally. Teddy

was sketching in one corner. As requested, Salina had set up a tarot reading that held Lady Dalrymple and Lady Pamela ensnared. Estelle hurried in at the last second, apologizing, after seeing to the children in the nursery. The governess and Drucilla took places in a distant corner. Most of the men had drinks in hand. The ladies clustered and gossiped. The servants discreetly took their places as directed, looking uneasy and out of place.

Iona and Gerard sat on a loveseat to her right, acting as guardians. She'd set the stage as best as she knew how.

Bell had utterly no idea how to summon Rain's grandmother. She didn't know if the spirit rested in between bouts of speaking or disappeared to some ethereal plane. If she survived this, she would have to start learning more about her dreadful gift.

As Rain spoke to the gathering, the suffocating presence she'd noticed earlier descended. Had that been the ghost trying to protect her when Nevins had treated her so rudely? She'd experienced it again while holding Drucilla.

She prayed the manifestation meant the ghost was present.

Before Rain even stopped explaining what they meant to do this evening, Dru's small voice piped up. "Look, the lady is up there!"

Bell heard the creaking of the enormous crystal chandelier—the one Rain's grandmother had brought with her when she married—perhaps confirmation that the "lady" was the deceased duchess? Swallowing hard, she glanced up with everyone else in the room. The crystals quivered.

Lady Dalrymple turned pale and tried to rise, but Salina curtly gestured for her to remain seated.

"Your Grace." Bell spoke deferentially to an entity she couldn't see. "I thank you for all you've done to help this household."

The crystals tinkled nicely, as they may have when the candles were lit and the glass heated. Except they weren't lit this evening.

Ignoring the other guests, Bell focused on Dru. When the child said no more, but merely watched the swaying fixture with fascination, she forced herself to speak again. How did one order

about a dead duchess?

“Your Grace, you said I was pushed. Could you tell us who did it?” She couldn’t be any more plain than that.

A gasp and murmur of alarm swept the room. Bell returned her attention to the main suspects at the tarot table. Lady Dalrymple seemed fretful, darting looks to her daughter. The actress merely turned over the next card for Sal to interpret.

Even if the ghost designated a murderer, they had no proof. Rainford had pointed that out, but he didn’t speak now, merely stood protectively behind her.

Sal abruptly sat back, letting out a little yip of surprise. The tarot layout she’d been working on scattered across the table, as if by an unseen hand.

Bell tensed, scanning the room for anything resembling a guilty reaction. But everyone was mesmerized by a card lifting of its own accord—to fall down in front of Sal. The two ladies with her uneasily pushed away from the table.

“The Justice card!” Sal cried, just as another card fell down in front of her. “And the Seven of Swords. I didn’t do that.”

Bell didn’t know the tarot, but flying cards were enough to cause consternation. Justice card? She liked the sound of that, but she knew the cards weren’t that simple.

“The lady did that!” Drucilla cried. “She wants to play cards.”

“Salina, do you know what Her Grace is telling us?” Bell didn’t know what else to say.

Sal looked reluctant to speak, but glancing at Rainford, she took a deep breath. “I cannot explain how the tarot works if you don’t already know. It depends on the person turning the cards, the question being asked, and my own interpretation, which is related to my gift for reading people. I have never tried to read a ghost. But in the position these cards fell, they’re negative. There is resistance to change, ambition, betrayal, deception, unfairness, dishonesty. . . I would not trust the person who had these cards.”

“I cannot imagine ghosts are trustworthy.” Lady Pamela drew

away from the table. "This farce is almost as juvenile as the script Lady Alicia wrote."

"Only because you're not starring in it." Sitting close to Bell, Alicia added her crystal to the small tea table in front of Bell. "Try concentrating on this. It's easier to look at than people."

Bell preferred to look at people. She wished she could see the ghost.

"It's positively icy in here, Theodore." Lady Pamela pulled her shawl over her nearly bare bosom and stood up. "I'm as likely to die of the cold as the boredom. I'd like to retire for the evening."

"You'll walk through the lady!" Drucilla cried. "She doesn't want you to leave."

Lady Pamela hesitated a fraction, long enough for Rain to signal the butler he'd assigned to the door. Franklin closed it and blocked the exit with his bulky frame.

If Lady Pamela was guilty, as they suspected, Bell really wanted to know why she'd earned the actress's spite. She had to continue and hope to draw her out.

"This may be an unorthodox means of detection, but it's better than throwing everyone out of the house. Lady Pamela, if you'll take your seat again, please, we'll continue." Rain's voice rang with authority.

The actress shot him a glare, glanced around, and finding no support even from Teddy, who was still sketching madly, she grudgingly removed herself to a place near the door, prepared to depart the moment it was allowed.

Bell took a deep breath and reminded herself why she was making a fool of herself—for Rain and his family and to be able to stay here. "Dru, is the lady still near the cards?"

Wide-eyed, Dru shook her head. "She followed the pretty lady to the door."

Wishing she had a better understanding so she could form better questions, Bell addressed the apparition again. "Your Grace, the lady by the door is Lady Pamela, your grandson's model. Is she

the one to whom your cards refer?”

If it was possible for cards to be thrown derisively, the ghost accomplished it. The deck rose from the table and flew at the actress. Lady Pamela looked startled. Murmurs whispered around the room. But everyone knew séances were dramatic performances and not real. No one appeared unduly alarmed. A few of the men began examining the cards to see how the trick was accomplished.

Bell rubbed her temples. Card flinging did not help. She had achieved nothing. She needed facts, not dramatics. Séances were meant for actresses like Lady Pamela.

She simply did not have the creativity to interpret ghost behavior. Reluctantly, she knew she had one last resort. With distaste, she asked, “Lady Dalrymple, would you object if Drucilla sat with me? She was useful this afternoon in helping Her Grace to speak.”

“Her Grace?” Drucilla’s mother looked confused. Rightfully so, since there was no one living to claim that title.

Estelle didn’t wait for simple-minded Lady Dalrymple to work it out. She picked up the child and carried her to Bell. “You have been doing a fine job, Drucilla. You are a very brave girl. Lady C would like your assistance in speaking to the lady, if you don’t mind.” She sat the child on Bell’s lap.

“The lady is walking back and forth again,” Dru whispered.

“She wants to say something,” Bell whispered back. “Let’s see what happens if we hold hands and look at that pretty rock, all right?”

The child looked dubious but didn’t object.

The moment Bell held the child’s hands and focused on the crystal, she felt the terrifyingly oppressive atmosphere fall over her. She knew what the spirit wanted—access that Bell had always blocked unless comatose. But she didn’t dare fall unconscious while holding Dru. She’d always been terrified of harming a child if she dropped like a ninny. But Dru was her best focus for reaching the spirit.



Stomach clenching, head pounding, Bell tried to accept that the ghost was helpful, not dangerous. Beating back her fear, she opened her mind instead of blocking it, and let the spirit in.

Words that weren't her own immediately spilled out. *The witch did it. Don't let her leave.*

"The funny-looking gentleman is here," Dru whispered in excitement.

A suit of armor at the exit rattled.

The gas lights died. A crash of metal followed, and a woman screamed.

THE BLACKNESS DESCENDING over the enormous drawing room had all the occupants screaming and swearing.

Rain immediately kneeled beside Bell in her chair, placing his body between her and the child and whatever in hell was happening. Outlined only by the fire's light, the pair seemed frozen in place. He knew he should be seeing to his family and guests, fighting his way to the door where a potential murderer might be escaping, but he couldn't abandon a child or this courageous, insane female who risked her own sanity for him and everyone else.

"Light the sconces," he shouted, since the crash of armor seemed to have led only to insensible shrieking. "Gerard, can you find your way to the door?"

Iona dropped down on the other side of the chair. "He's heading that way now. Bell, Bell, are you there?"

Bell didn't reply. Rain rubbed his hands up and down her arms—not easily because the child was clinging to her, weeping.

The voices of his brothers-in-law rose above the chaos, repeating his orders. Relieved to have their aid and that he needn't leave Bell, Rain spoke with trained neutrality—his *healing* voice, he prayed. "Bell? Can you hear me?"

She shook her head, then shuddered a little. Rain continued running his hands up and down her arms, speaking soothingly, willing her to wake.

Finally, she drew a deep breath. "I'm. . . I'm all right, I think. I didn't fall comatose. I just. . . I don't know." Sounding a little shocked, she glanced down at Dru. "How are you feeling, sweetie?"

“The ghost lady doesn’t like the pretty lady. And the funny gentleman is helping her.”

“That makes almost as much sense as anything else this evening.” In gratitude that neither of them had been rendered insensible, Rain kissed Bell’s cheek and stroked Dru’s little nose. Rage and terror still roared like a tiger trapped by his rib cage, but he wouldn’t frighten them by releasing it. “Will the two of you be all right here with Lady Iona? I think I need to stop the pretty lady.”

“You have no proof,” Bell warned. “I proved *nothing*.”

“Except that Her Grace is excitable and has another ghost with her. That was a powerful gust.” As sconces were relighted, gradually illuminating the shadows, Rain stood, guarding Bell while surveying the chaos.

The shrieking actress lay beneath a hundred pounds of armor, pummeling the metal with her fists. The old iron suit had guarded the drawing room for decades, maybe even centuries. It didn’t look much worse for wear.

His steadfast butler still blocked the exit. Franklin appeared bemused and startled and held a hand to his impressive mutton chop. A tinge of red showed on his cheekbone where he’d apparently been slapped. Lady Pamela must have attempted to push past him in the darkness. The old man wouldn’t be of any use lifting the armor. Gerard was dismantling it, unable to pick up the bulky collection of metal in one piece by himself.

*Lady Pamela* was the guilty party? Rain would beat a confession out of her if he must, but first, he had to be sure Teddy wasn’t involved as well.

Refusing to aid the irate thespian, he looked for his artist cousin, who stood stunned, staring at his sketchpad. “Teddy, your lady is having another fit. Perhaps you wish to help Gerard untangle her?”

Confession or not, Lady Pamela would be on the train in the morning. For now, he had to prevent mass hysterics.

Leaving the drama to others, Rain verified that Bell was still upright, then abandoned her to her sister while he performed his task as host to calm his guests. If his terrifying specter of a grandmother was still about, he didn't want to know it. He hugged each of his sisters, grateful they didn't batter him with questions he couldn't answer. Instead, they helped him make the rounds of terrified ladies, assuring everyone all was well. He prayed they weren't lying.

He needed to learn to rely on his family more often. Once the room was properly lit, the servants ran about, offering drinks. His guests, being of sound mind and strong curiosity, settled down with the beverages of their choice and watched as Gerard and Teddy lifted the armor off the furious actress.

Estelle approached him as family spokesperson. "Is she guilty, Rain? Does this mean our grandmother believes Lady Pamela pushed Bell? It makes no sense."

He wished he had an answer for that.

"Can you translate Pamela's curses?" Rain watched as Teddy lifted the screeching actress while Gerard and one of the younger footmen restored the armor to its place. "Why don't we invite the monkeys and parrot to join her in a chorus? They'd make as much sense."

"Bell suggested we have the animals removed to the conservatory. That's why we brought the more poisonous plants in here. I'll be happy to fetch them, if you like."

Rain was pretty certain that was his sister being humorous.

"She's possessed!" The actress finally screamed something perceptible if not sensible. "The countess is a witch possessed by a demon!"

That shout went over well in a room full of women who called themselves witches. Several snickered. Rain rather thought that was not the reaction Lady Pamela intended.

To his surprise, Bell rose and deposited the child into the arms of her weeping mother. Her twin attempted to hold her back, but

Bell shook her off and approached the ugly scene at the door. Gut clenching, Rain immediately followed.

In that fashionable gold gown with the bustle and train, her hair caught up in gardenias, with pearls at her throat, Bell looked the very last thing from demonic. Uncertain what she meant to do after that raging insult, Rain thought he might offer to cut the screaming banshee's throat for her. If nothing else, he'd stand between the women and protect Bell from harm.

He didn't interfere after Bell shook her head at him but waited cautiously.

"Having your own theater is important to you, isn't it?" Bell asked, radiating sympathy. Teddy prevented further violence by holding his inamorata in a bear hug.

"People like you don't understand!" Pamela cried. "You have everything. I was born with nothing. I need him more than you do."

Rain watched his cousin's face, but oblivious Teddy merely looked puzzled.

"I was born with very little except the opportunity to work and learn," Bell said calmly. "I have no funds of my own. Teddy has no interest in me. I'm not the actress he needs."

Iona swept up to hug her twin and whisper in her ear. Rain planned on asking for a full explanation of this evening as soon as he dragged the damned countess from the room, but he understood that Iona had some ability to smell emotion. She'd already mentioned Pamela's avarice. She'd been right on the mark.

"Teddy can't marry me without money!" Lady Pamela fought his cousin's embrace. "Everyone knows if Rainford doesn't marry before the duke dies, the money goes to Teddy. The marquess won't starve without the trust, but we might!"

Charming. The grasping actress thought herself more important than Teddy's family, which made sense from her perspective—except the trust wasn't hers. And she seemed to believe it ought to be. Still, why Bell?

“Rainford can marry any woman he likes. Why pick on me?” Asking the question they all needed answered, Bell examined the butler’s reddened cheek. The old man reddened more.

“Because the duke is dying, and you’re the only woman the Ice King notices. You’re as cold a fish as he is. You deserve each other, but you have to know he’ll never marry a servant like you. That doesn’t mean you can have Teddy instead!” She quit struggling, and Teddy loosened his hold. He appeared as puzzled as everyone else.

Rain didn’t need to hear more. He started forward, until Bell held up a hand. “Iona says she smells of guilt,” she whispered, for his ears alone. With a lifetime of practice, he reined in his temper and impatience and stepped back. But he stood within arm’s reach of her.

“So you thought murdering me was the answer?”

That, the company gasped. The entire room descended into deafening silence.

Lady Pamela didn’t appear to notice. “You’re not dead, are you? You didn’t fall that far. I broke my nose and ankle when I fell off the stage. I can’t get the good roles anymore because I can’t dance. I wanted him to see you’re nothing special.”

“Who?” Teddy asked, a frown creasing his wide brow. “*Who* would be stupid enough to see Bell as nothing special?”

Pamela finally wept. “You, you fool. You kept saying if you could marry Lady Craigmore, she would handle the money and everything would be fine. But you’d toss me out soon enough. She’d see to that.”

“I meant to marry *you*!” Teddy sounded as appalled as he looked. “I just asked Rain for a settlement. Bell doesn’t want *me*!”

Rainford couldn’t allow the family drama to continue for the delectation of the gossips. He had to end this bad opera. “Lady Pamela just admitted to assaulting Lady Craigmore, Teddy. As magistrate, it’s my duty to send her to assizes, if the countess wishes to press charges. How do you want me to handle this?” He

studied Bell.

She looked exhausted but still brushed his cheek with her reassuring fingertips. “She’s dangerous to herself and others, but she’s a lady. I don’t know what’s best.”

Before Rain could reach for her, her twin took her waist and led her away.

*Crap dung and other filth.* Maybe the family eccentricity shouldn’t propagate. Maybe the distant cousin would make a better duke. Because he damned well wasn’t marrying anyone else but Bell, and he thought quite possibly they were both mad.

Another man might have stormed after her, but Rain had spent too many years controlling his emotions and doing his duty. He had a responsibility not only to his family, but the community at large. If Lady Pamela truly was violent, she needed to be put away. But he was a damned physician, trained to cure, not to punish.

Rain raised his eyebrows at his cousin.

“She’s high-strung. That’s what makes her a good actress. I’ll send her away.” Teddy had not taken the weeping actress back in his arms, but he still looked defensive about the woman he’d brought into their home.

“You might want to take a closer look at what you sketched, Teddy.” Alicia approached with Teddy’s sketchpad in hand.

Rain stifled a groan. It was hard enough reining in his temper and not flinging Pamela into a dungeon to rot just so he might run after Bell. But if he had to deal with one more ghost. . .

Lombard, his solicitor brother-in-law, came to stand beside him. “Let the court handle her. She’s not worth your time.”

Gerard appeared at his other side. “I’ll take her in in the morning. We’ll lock her up for the evening.”

Rain wanted to shout *She’s all yours* and run after Bell. He was more than ready to share his duties. But he couldn’t ignore Alicia’s warning, especially since Teddy seemed to crumple in on himself at seeing the sketch.

“I was just drawing the scene. Séance scenes sell well,” Teddy

said in despair as Rain's sisters gathered around Alicia to study the drawing.

"Séances with your duchess grandmother haunting the room probably aren't a good choice." Rain grimly took the drawing pad his sisters handed to him.

"I can't help what I sketch!" Teddy protested.

Garland and Delahey studied the paper over Rain's shoulder.

Included in an excellent representation of the actual drawing room was the outline of a transparent apparition in an ethereal Regency gown, her hair piled high with diadems and a tiara. The ghost pointed condemningly at Lady Pamela, who was all but engulfed by a black-draped specter of death.

"Does that mean she's dying or has killed before?" Lombard asked in legal mode, studying the sketch along with Rain.

Not that anyone outside this insane household would have seen anything except an imaginative picture—but Teddy had a reputation in the family for drawing warnings.

"I didn't mean to kill anyone," Lady Pamela whimpered, clinging to Teddy's broad chest. "But he called me a talentless cow, and I yanked the cord—"

Teddy held out his arms, not touching her, but he looked so startled and torn, that Rain almost felt sympathy for his thick-headed cousin. "Before she incriminates herself any more, lock her up. Put a guard on her door. Teddy, I'm sorry, but we'll have to take her into York in the morning. I refuse to be judge and jury in this case. Let the professionals decide what else she's done."

All Rain wanted to do was go to Bell and see that the evening hadn't harmed her.

He may have just condemned a lady to death. He thought that was quite enough for the night. It was time to hand the reins over to others. He didn't have to do it all, he reminded himself. That's what family was for.

"Gerard, I'll take you up on the offer to take Lady Pamela to York in the morning, thank you. Lombard, Delahey, Garland, I



leave you in charge of seeing she's guarded and kept safe. Ladies, I leave the company to you. Ted, let's go upstairs. You can pour us a night-cap." He caught his stunned cousin's shoulder and steered him from the room.

Sometimes, one had to be a man and not a marquess. Rain thought this might be one of those times. He'd have to trust Bell was safe with her sister.

"THIS IS YOUR APARTMENT?" Iona swept through the immense suite Bell claimed for her own. "May I move in with you? Gerard's castle tower might have a lovely bath, but it's nowhere as elegant. I swear, only men have lived in it for the past hundred years."

"My apartment doesn't include your husband," Bell remarked, amused. "I could have an entire house in the village, but that seemed much too complicated. I like it here."

"Does your apartment have Rainford? He loves you, you know." Iona swept back to confront her.

"He lusts after me. That's not the same. And I've barely had time to learn to like things as they are. You've not had the full effect of his household yet. Tonight was only a taste of the ongoing drama. I can hide away in here when it all becomes too much." She lacked authority to do more.

"Or you can leave and go to Craigmore any time." Iona nodded understanding. "After seeing that ghost at work, I can see the appeal. Our haunts are more phlegmatic."

Bell attempted a smile. "Not entirely certain that's true, but a dying duke probably stirred the duchess. Now, if you don't mind. . . I'm exhausted. And Gerard will be galloping the halls looking for you."

Iona exclaimed, hugged her, and swept out, leaving her to her maid.

Bell hated driving away her sister, but she really needed to find

herself again. This business of letting apparitions take over was physically as well as mentally draining. She didn't think she could do it often, although after tonight. . . She might have to flee to distant Craigmores simply to escape the notoriety.

With Button's help, Bell undressed, but she wasn't ready for bed yet. After sending the maid to her room, she sat with her slippers on feet up by the dying fire, enjoying the luxury Rain had provided for her. She had to love the man if only for his understanding of her need for this privacy.

She wasn't entirely certain what she'd done this evening or if she could ever do it again. She prayed the ghostly duchess would depart now that the duke was recovering and a potential killer had been unmasked. A little normality would be nice.

Then Bell could settle into her task of steward, have lovely conversations with Rainford's sisters—who would be returning to their own homes if the duke recovered. Even Alicia was likely to leave for London come spring.

Leaving Bell alone with Rain.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't be his mistress and watch him marry another.

She couldn't enter into a loveless marriage just because he needed a wife.

She wanted to believe he might heal her faintheartedness, but the chances were slim. How much of herself would she lose if she stayed in hopes he could heal her? After this evening, she feared she didn't have much of herself left to lose. It would only grow worse with time if she stayed here.

She should go home with Iona and her husband. With Gerard's Aunt Winifred gone, the earl didn't have a household steward. Bell could handle his books. There would be other Malcolms about. She might learn to control the spirits haunting her from the safety of company who understood.

She had choices. She simply had to make them.

When Rainford scratched at the door of her suite some time

later, Bell wrapped up in her robe and answered before he could wake Button.

The normally elegant marquess looked exhausted and half drunk. He smelled faintly of whiskey and had unfastened his coat and loosened his cravat. Even though he'd shaved for dinner, he still had a stubble shadowing his luscious cheekbones. His fair hair fell over his forehead as if he'd drawn his fingers through it repeatedly.

"If you weren't so well tailored, you'd look like a sot," she said, unable to hide a smile at seeing this side of him. Her heart ached for him, but she'd had years of experience in shielding it.

Rainford didn't smile back. "I needed to know you're well. I've spent these last hours terrified I'd find you comatose again. May I come in?" He propped his arm against the door jamb as if unable to stand on his own.

Her well-shielded heart lurched, but Bell shook her head. "I'm fine. I'm tired. Button may not be asleep. Has everything been settled to your satisfaction?"

"No, and I doubt it ever will be. That's not how this household operates. But none of that matters if I know you're well." He bent over and kissed her.

Her heart nearly broke knowing she'd have to give up his passion if she left. He had responsibilities that required a bride she couldn't be.

He'd promised to marry her, but she'd seen the results of a marriage made without love. And if he regretted their impetuosity when she didn't bear him a son, he'd learn to resent her. She didn't want that for herself. Her freedom was too precious.

So she kissed him, then gently pushed him from the door, closed, and locked it.

LOOKING like a man condemned to death, Teddy traveled with the Earl of Ives and Lady Pamela to York the next morning. Of course, Rain observed, Teddy hadn't seen the morning sun in years and certainly not after drowning in a bottle of whiskey, so he might *feel* like death.

Perhaps the family should have spent more time looking for a sensible heiress for Teddy instead of one for Rain. He'd have to ask his sisters to arrange something.

After being turned from Bell's door last night, he couldn't concentrate. Bell was too sensitive to his family's feelings to agree to be his mistress, but how did he convince his *steward* to be his wife? She'd already turned him down twice. How the hell did he convince her she was the only woman he wanted? Make a romantic proposal over bookkeeping journals? While preventing his interfering household from interfering?

Unable to work when his mind was elsewhere, Rain went up to visit his father. The duke was in the process of bullying his valet into dressing him. The servant looked relieved at Rain's entrance.

"You are not leaving this suite," Rain ordered without bothering to ask what his father was doing. "You're not carrying enough weight to be certain you won't undo everything we've done. And I have no assurance I can do it again."

"I'm tired of these four walls. Where is Bell? Where is everyone? What the hell happened last night?" The duke grudgingly allowed the valet to slip a dressing robe over his shirt and trousers.

"Alicia hasn't been in to tell you everything with much drama

and a few musicians?” Rain accepted an offer of tea and sat down to force the duke to do the same.

“Word is that she’s writing an opera.” The duke’s voice was dry enough to roast chestnuts. “Could we have Bell summon your mother’s spirit and ask if Alicia is really mine?”

Rain knew his father was being facetious. The duchess had doted on him and died bearing Alicia. His youngest sister had been spoiled since birth as a consequence. “Our mother’s side of the family includes an aunt who traveled alone to Egypt and an uncle who composed music for Vauxhall. She’s one of us without a doubt. Alicia has very little purpose for her gift of persuasion and merely seeks creative outlets.”

The duke hmphed and nibbled a scone placed on the tray to tempt him. “If they’re all avoiding me, then *something* happened.”

“Teddy’s intended confessed to pushing Bell downstairs and may have confessed to murder. I think that may top my intended running off with the steward.”

His father raised a graying eyebrow and waited.

Rain sighed and settled in for questioning. “Teddy and Ives are taking Pamela to the authorities in York. I am praying your mother’s ghost is satisfied and will go back to her grave. Anything else?”

“The whole story, please. I have nothing better to do but listen. Although I’d rather have Bell tell it. I assume my mother used her for the drama? Where is she? Is she all right?”

Good question, one Rain didn’t feel qualified to answer. “I don’t believe I have the whole story yet. Bell was tired last night after dealing with Her Grace. I assume she’s in her office this morning. I’ve had no word otherwise.”

And he was trying very hard not to go down and see. He didn’t wish to risk being thrown out again. He needed time to think and plan.

“Damn, you’re a cold-blooded sort. Good to have a clear head, I suppose, but you’ll never marry this way. Give me the story.” The

duke sat back and sipped his tea, looking regal even in his dressing gown.

Coldness was in the bones, Rain decided. Strong jaw, square chin. . . like his own and that of his knightly antecedents. They'd been bred to be strong and command with authority—not to talk about *feelings*. “I learned from the best. You're interrogating me instead of showing concern for how Teddy is faring or how the other guests and family are taking the drama. They saw a *ghost* speak through Bell, swing a chandelier, blow out the lights, and knock over a suit of armor. I arrested a lady, one of our guests, and you want me to narrate a news report?”

His father glared at him over the teacup. “Were you intending to tell me how they reacted? Have you asked how I feel about my mother haunting the house?”

“Have you ever shown an iota of interest in revealing how you feel about *us*?”

The duke narrowed his eyes but conceded the point. “We're a pair, I suppose. Never really had time to be irresponsible like Teddy. I proposed to your mother after having danced with her twice and taken her for a carriage ride through the park with her chaperone in tow. We didn't know each other. She was only eighteen, and I was the catch of the season. I didn't have any doubt of her acceptance.”

“You were a cold, arrogant bastard, just like you call me, and she still adored you. You were fortunate.” That was essentially what Rain had done with Araminta. Except his father had chosen a woman with more backbone. And modern women had more freedom.

“I'd not be duke if I was a bastard,” his father said in amusement. “And I learned to adore your mother. It takes respect to build a marriage. If a haunted countess does not suit, find someone else. Just marry and get it out of the way, as I did. It's not as if we're the sort to moon about over unsuitable females. If I'm not dying yet, you have time. Go. Marry one. Be done with it. Who

is next on your list? I know you have one.”

Rain had thrown out the list the day Bell had entered his life. She didn’t meet any of the requirements on it. She was a Malcolm and unlikely to give him a son. She was as barmy as all his relations. And she hadn’t any wealth to hold the family together if Teddy ultimately inherited the trust, as he would, if Rain didn’t have a son.

Nothing had changed—except him. He wanted Bell and no other, proving he was as irresponsible and mad as everyone else. He wasn’t prepared to admit it to his father yet.

How did he break down and tell Bell how he felt? And would she even care? She didn’t need him. She had no family or society with expectations to fulfill. Unlike his father, Rain had every reason to expect she’d reject him.

He was pretty certain he’d reject himself if he were in her shoes. He needed a plan.

“WHAT KIND of food would a lady from Scotland like?” Rain asked his patient later that morning. A farrier from Edinburgh who had stabbed himself with a hoof knife when the horse had kicked at him, the man needed distraction. Using his soothing voice, Rain cleaned and wrapped the wound. “And music? Surely a Scottish lady won’t need bagpipes for a romantic dinner?”

“Dinnae know what a lady likes,” the farrier admitted. “Been fur too long since I been home or courted. Don’ recommend the haggis though.”

“Dancing,” Rain decided, continuing to talk in hopes it healed the wound faster. He did feel a bit of heat as he dressed it. “She likes dancing. A musician who can play a waltz. A special dessert that requires being set on fire. And wine. Lots of wine. She thinks too much, like me. I need her to stop thinking for a while.”

His next patient was a housewife who’d scalded her foot

dropping a kettle of boiling water. Applying the unguent and hoping he was doing some good with his voice, Rain continued speaking his problem aloud. “She doesn’t wear much jewelry so I don’t know what she likes. But I should offer her something when I propose. It should show I’m thinking of her.”

“A ring,” his patient suggested. “A woman likes a nice ring.”

He’d never really talked to his patients before. No wonder he hadn’t healed. “I have my mother’s and grandmother’s rings—but would she want a ring from the duchess who haunts her? I don’t know. I don’t know anything! I need more time.”

He was losing his soothing tone. Rain took a deep breath and decided he’d find every ring in the safe.

“Love makes you a nicer gentleman,” the patient decided as Rain finished wrapping her bandage. “Or maybe love makes you talk nicer.”

*Love.* He wanted to heal, but maybe what he was doing was offering love for his fellow humans? Could Bell love him back? Did love multiply and grow? Overwhelmed, he stuck to his first goal.

“How does one propose?” he asked the governess who brought one of his nephews down to be examined after he’d fallen off the furniture playing pirate. “Do I go down on one knee after we dance? Or at a candlelit table over her favorite dessert?”

“If you’re speaking of the countess, you might have to do it over a set of books and with a hot cup of tea in hand.”

The governess had a point. But Bell had accused him of not being romantic. He had to be romantic. Begging didn’t sound romantic. Neither did being rejected because she thought he wanted a son.

*Love* had provided the answer to the Malcolm argument—he’d tell her he would find Teddy a sensible wife who would produce sensible heirs they could all raise—sensibly. It would work out. Somehow. Sharing his responsibilities made sense if it gave him time to woo the countess.

He gave his nephew—Estelle’s son, he thought—a stethoscope



to listen into while he worked on the boy's knee, and talked, letting his pent-up love grow into his voice.

"How is Drucilla?" He needed to speak with Lady Dalrymple, who had yet to ask him to look at her daughter. He had to heal the brilliant child who had so bravely helped Bell. Noticing the children around him added to his duty roster, but if he wanted to heal. . . Then he had to have enough love to notice them. A clinic was good. Healing was better.

The governess cuddled his nephew. "Dru is doing remarkably well, considering. She's regaling the nursery with her tale of ghosts."

As Rain patted the boy's bruised knee and offered him a licorice, Alicia burst into his clinic. "She's leaving, Rain! You can't let her leave. Do something!"

Drawn from his intense concentration, Rain stared at his sister for half a minute, waiting for the rest of the sentence.

"Go," the governess urged. "As long as the bone isn't broken, the boy will be fine."

"Who's leaving?" he asked, washing his hands, trying to make sense of Alicia's ranting.

"Bell! Bell is leaving! She's looking for you to say farewell! She's going with her sister. They're meeting the earl at the train station and *leaving*! The chandeliers are swinging and the monkeys are out of their cage, and she thinks the ghost is telling her to leave, so she is."

Panic struck his heart. Before Alicia finished, Rain was already halfway up the stairs and shouting orders. "Find someone to play a pretty waltz! Have the cook make a pudding to light on fire. I have to fetch the jewel box. Don't let her out of the door!"

CLASPING her gloved hands and fighting tears, Bell left the duke's suite and glanced hopefully at Rain's sister. "Did you find him?"

“Alicia is looking. You don’t have to leave today, you know. We can avoid the chandeliers for another day or so, perhaps have the workmen take them down.” Estelle blocked her path to the stairs.

Bell shook her head. “You need to help Rainford find a bride. I’m a distraction, and your grandmother is telling me so. I hadn’t realized. . . I never meant. . .” She sighed, unable to admit that the marquess might actually be distracted by *her* and that people were noticing. But Lady Pamela had noticed and now everyone knew. Bell dodged around Estelle and headed for the main stairs.

“Pamela is an hysteric. You can’t let her drive you away.” Estelle ran after her.

“Your guests want more séances,” Bell argued sadly. “They’re sending me notes, asking if I might speak with their loved ones. I cannot *do* that.”

“I will tell them all to go home, that you only work with our ghosts,” Estelle argued staunchly.

Bell appreciated that argument. Alicia might persuade people of such a ridiculousness. But she continued downward, holding tightly to the railing.

Estelle didn’t have to hurry to keep up. “Rain still needs a steward.”

“He had a perfectly fine one. Davis was as honest and careful as it is possible for a man to be, and he’s family. He has a wife now. He could use the position and the house. Rainford simply needs to get over his snit. I’m needed at Wystan, not here.” Bell avoided walking directly under the chandelier swaying dangerously over the entry hall.

“Rain doesn’t have snits,” Estelle argued. “How can he trust a man who stole his fiancée?”

“Araminta wasn’t his fiancée. He is not heartbroken. It is a snit. Your brother isn’t an Ice King. He lives inside his head for a very good reason, but he is not made of ice. What is that music?” Bell hesitated on the lower step.

A piano and violin playing a waltz echoed through the marble

entrance—a decent waltz and not Alicia’s painful pounding.

Iona waited with their bags near the door. Bell’s twin studied the swinging chandelier worriedly and looked relieved once Bell reached the ground floor.

Salina joined Estelle. “We are arranging a musicale for the evening. Some of our guests are more talented than Alicia. Really, you could stay. The footmen almost have the monkeys trapped.”

The parrot flew overhead, squawking and dropping a red feather.

“I really hoped to say my farewells to Rainford in person. Is he in the gymnasium? Might I be allowed down there?” Bell knew she was being presumptuous, but she simply could not abandon Rainford so callously. It would almost be like Araminta running away.

She wanted to make it clear that she wasn’t Araminta. She wasn’t running from Rain. She was letting him go back to the life he had before he thought the duke was dying. He didn’t need to marry now, not soon, anyway. She didn’t want him feeling obligated to marry her.

A footman wheeled a tea trolley from the back hall. On it rested the most splendid plum pudding Bell had ever seen, complete with a blue flame flickering across the top like magic fire. An awesome spectacle like that belonged at the end of a pleasant evening of wining and dining in good company.

“How? *Why*. . . ?” Bell stuttered, unable to blame this new oddity on ghosts, although eccentricity certainly had to be involved. Plum puddings took a long time to make and shouldn’t be wasted rolling around midday with no one to observe.

“His Grace likes plum pudding on his birthday. It’s a little early, but Rainford said to light it anyway.” Victoria appeared behind the trolley along with her husband. “You could stay for the duke’s birthday, you know. We have you to thank for letting him live to see it.”

“No, I did nothing. Rain—”

The musicians struck up a merrier tune, burying her protest.

Drawn by the pudding and the music, guests began to join them. Bell felt as if she were the center of a circus and didn't know what act she was expected to perform. Nervously, she eased toward Iona.

*"Don't go yet!"* Rainford's voice echoed down from above. "Give me a minute."

Puzzled, not knowing if she should be alarmed, Bell searched the shadows at the top of the stairs. Her heart pounded a little harder in anticipation of seeing Rain again. She hoped she did not drop like a rock before she had a chance to say farewell.

*"Now, Dru, drop them now."* The echoing reverberations of the entryway picked up the male whisper.

A shower of fragrant pink and white blossoms tumbled over the upstairs railing. The parrot squawked happily and flew through them, scattering petals onto the flaming pudding. The delicate blue flared into a bonfire flinging out sparks. To the gasps and shrieks of guests, the footman hastily poured tea over the cook's work of art.

Heart thumping, Bell scoured the upper hall for the mad marquess. What in the name of the goddess was he doing?

A moment later, wearing a top hat, an unfastened tailed evening coat and starched collar, the breath-takingly striking, normally blasé, Marquess of Rainford dashed down the stairs, under the swinging chandelier, carrying Drucilla. Bell feared she might faint simply at the sheer magnificence of the sight. He was stunningly handsome in his black and white, but many men were handsome.

Not every man would think to carry a lame child who gave every appearance of having the time of her life. Bell wasn't entirely certain *why* he was carrying her, but the sight made her want to cry anyway. She had hoped that together they might heal Dru just a little, but he'd never mentioned it.

The chandelier rocked a little harder as Rainford reached the

ground floor and immediately dropped to one knee, still holding Dru. "Show her, Dru," he whispered. "Open the box."

By now, every guest and servant in the house, and possibly every person who lived on the estate, was spilling into the huge circular entry. They pushed and shoved for a better sight of the Ice King on his knees. Covering her mouth, Bell froze, uncertain of what was expected of her.

"Don't go, Lady C," Dru said, holding up a velvet box. "I can't open it."

Laughter tittered around the room.

Rain juggled child and box and managed to open the top to reveal a collection of brilliant jewels. "I didn't have time to choose the one best suited to you. Sapphires and diamonds and pearls seemed right, but then I remembered how lovely you look in gold, and I just threw in everything."

Tears crept down Bell's cheeks. "I don't know. . . I'm. . . I just. . ." Shattered by the restrained marquess making a passionate spectacle of himself in front of friends and family, she couldn't speak.

"Marry me, Lady Isobel Craigmores, be my marchioness, be my wife and mother of my children, please. I love you madly, obviously, because I've gone utterly barmy and can't seem to find the words. . . Help me, please!" On the tongue of a polished gentleman—a *lord*—as educated and experienced as Rainford, the desperate plea was astonishing and heartrending.

Weeping openly, Bell dropped to her knees in front of him. She closed the jewelry box and wrapped Dru's hands tightly around it. "Take these to the pudding table, please, can you do that?"

"I can." Dru stood, and holding the velvet box on both of her small arms, proudly hobbled away.

"I love you, Bell," Rainford whispered. With both hands free, he caught her cheeks and kissed her in front of all his family and guests. "Marry me, please. The duke thinks a wife might learn to love me. I'll do whatever it takes to make you love me, I promise. I

don't want to make the mistake of waiting any longer."

She wanted this man so much. . . so very much. She'd tried so hard to shield herself from this kind of pain. She. . .

She blinked in realization. "I didn't faint. You threw flowers at me, and I didn't faint. You've shocked me to my very core, and *I didn't faint.*"

"I'll throw flowers at you every day. I'll shower you in jewels. You can *not* faint as much as you like." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "Just tell me what you want, make me understand, because you don't talk any better than I do. I think it may be *love* that heals. If so, I can try to heal your weak heart. Together, we might heal Dru. Would you like that? Or we can go to Sommersville and disturb the ghosts there. Hold exorcisms, if you like. Have plum pudding every day. Only tell me what you need to be happy, and you shall have it."

Her heart pounded so hard, she thought the feeble organ might turn inside out from the ferocity. She so seldom spoke of what she felt or what she wanted. . . He was right. Rainford didn't show his feelings because he had so much responsibility, he had to keep his own counsel at all times.

But she didn't speak—because she was afraid.

She had lived her entire life in fear—of poverty, of her stepfather, of the ghosts that threatened to possess her. They were very real fears, but she'd been trapped by them.

Here was a brilliant man offering her everything she'd ever wanted and a freedom she'd never imagined. She couldn't let fear stand in her way, could she?

"I. . ." She hadn't even allowed herself to think it. To say it outright. . . Because she was too terrified to express herself.

Bell took a deep breath to steady her nerves. Even knowing everyone watched and strained to hear over the music, she had to say what her heart was telling her. "What I need is for you to be happy," she whispered.

That didn't sound quite right. She stammered and tried again.

“I mean, it is your happiness that makes me happy. But if it is *my* happiness you seek, I need you to be happy about loving me,” she said a little louder. “Because I don’t want to love you if it will hurt you in any way. I couldn’t bear it. I need. . .” She wept, unable to express all the things she’d never learned to say.

Rainford stood and lifted her. With both arms around her waist, he swung Bell into a waltz, and kissed her, kissed her hard and thoroughly and with so much enthusiasm that the crowd had to back away as they swung around the marble floor. “I love you, I love you today and I will love you more tomorrow forever and always. You can only hurt me by leaving me. Can you love a cold and unfeeling man like me?”

Bell laughed in joy at such nonsense. “I love you now and forever and a day, and there is nothing cold and unfeeling about you, as I well know.”

The entire enormous castle rang with laughter and applause until even the duke tottered out of his suite to look on.

And the chandelier stopped swinging.

## Twenty-eight

ROWANS ADORNED with silver and gold ribbons filled the Castle Yates ballroom, creating a fairy forest.

Still looking skeletal but standing without effort, the father of the groom stood in the center of this forest and gave the bride away—only one eccentricity among many.

An orchestra played from the gallery above. The bride wore a shimmering gown of translucent gold gauze over a silver underskirt and train. Her face was more radiant than the jewels adorning her throat and hair. The groom, in black and white, with only a gold waistcoat to relieve the severity, could not drag his gaze from her beauty. The vicar speaking the service had to cough repeatedly to catch his attention.

Guests waltzed in between the rowans as the couple vowed to love, honor, and take each other in equality.

Lord and Lady Ives served as best man and matron of honor. Instead of bouquets—which were difficult to find in winter, especially after every blossom in the conservatory had been plucked—they carried bottles of champagne, which they opened as the groom kissed the bride. Champagne sprayed all their finery.

The plum pudding was resurrected and served along with every delicacy the bride managed to name—although she asked for suggestions from the entire family before naming them.

With no aisle for parading down, the flower girl simply limped where she wished, flinging bits of glittery ribbon and candies, until she grew tired and sat down to stick her thumb in the pudding. Her mother found her there and carried her off to the nursery, murmuring promises of more candies in the future.



A bear of a young man with his beard newly trimmed and wearing a tailored suit that showed off his broad physique danced with a shy young widow. It was rumored she was only the daughter of a merchant, but she had a dowry to shame a princess and a mansion in London. And she watched the young man with obvious adoration.

The chandeliers only tinkled once in a slight breeze. The duke lifted a glass of champagne in toast, and the gaslights flared brighter.

The bride laughed, and the groom swept her away.

In other words, it was a typical Malcolm wedding.

“IT’S WORKING SO WELL, I’m terrifying myself,” Rain whispered as he clasped Bell’s hand over her heart.

They’d long since divested themselves of bridal finery and christened their marital bed—in the north wing, well away from the family chambers. They’d also christened a wall and a carpet in front of the fire and were currently in the bathtub covered in bubbles.

“I can feel your heat.” Bell leaned her head back against her husband’s broad, naked, shoulder and let his healing touch burn through her. “It’s as if you’ve removed. . . I don’t know, a blanket? A wall? There’s a difference. Keep talking.”

“Do you remember anything I told you about the clinic I want to open?”

Bell absorbed his words as he painted his dreams. Perhaps it was just the promise of the future that warmed her heart, making her stronger. They had so very much to learn together, but she knew with all her soul that they would find a way, even if the ghosts had to come out of the woodwork to mark the path.

Rain had so very much to give. . . he would make the world a better place. And she would be there to clear his path. She knew

how to manage his family and his household while he shouldered broader achievements, the ones his wealth and intelligence had been designed to accomplish.

Better yet, she knew how to reach into *his* heart and help him to release all the love he'd hidden so deep inside.

Alicia had already asked Bell to persuade him to fund an organization for training women as teachers and secretaries. Bell was pretty certain Alicia meant to persuade her trainees to support women's suffrage, but she didn't think Rain needed to know that. Impervious to his sister's blandishments, he didn't really understand how persuasive Alicia could be.

"I don't want to let you go," he whispered as the bath water cooled. "I'm having difficulty believing that after all these years, I've finally found the perfect woman."

"Thank your grandmother," she whispered against his ear as she kneeled, then turned to face him. He soaped her breasts while she settled over his arousal.

The glory of this joining could never be dimmed. Her brilliant husband's intense concentration had more than one purpose. He rendered her mindless while holding her safe, even as her womb convulsed and drew his essence deeper.

And then there it was, that tiny shimmering bolt of lightning, a magic shot in the dark in that part of her that made her woman. Her eyes widened briefly as the spirit filled her.

"Your grandmother wasn't a twin, was she?" she murmured later as Rain lifted her from the cooling water.

"Not that I'm aware of." He wrapped her in a heated towel. "Why?"

It was too early to tell him of her vision.

But if all went well, in nine months' time, she'd bear him a girl *and* a boy —and they'd be Malcolms.

## Characters

**Jasper Winchester, Marquess of Rainford (Rain)**—heir to Duke of Sommersville  
**Douglas Winchester, Duke of Sommersville**—Rainford's father  
**Isobel (Bell) Malcolm Ross, Lady Craigmore**—countess, steward  
**Theodore (Teddy) Winchester Jr.**—Rainford's artist cousin  
**Honorable Araminta Rutledge**—Rainford's almost fiancé  
**Victoria, Lady Delahey**—Rainford's oldest married sister  
**Estelle, Lady Garland**—Rainford's next oldest married sister  
**Mrs. Salina Lombard**—Rainford's youngest married sister  
**Lady Alicia Winchester**—Rainford's youngest sister, unmarried  
**John Davis**—steward, Rainford's cousin  
**Winifred Malcolm**—Bell's friend  
**Carla Bianco**—Teddy's opera star mistress  
**Franklins**—butler and housekeeper  
**Sir "Harry" Harrison**—Rainford's bachelor friend  
**Lady Pamela**—Teddy's recent actress conquest  
**Martha Button**—lady's maid and seamstress  
**Helen, Lady Dalrymple**—Rainford's distant widowed cousin  
**Drucilla Dalrymple**—Helen's crippled daughter  
**Philippa Malcolm Damon**—governess  
**Lawrence Nevins**—young bachelor; friend of Lady Dalrymple

## School of Magic Series

### ***Lessons in Enchantment***

#### Book 1 of School of Magic



*Can a straitlaced engineer, three psychic children, and a lonely witch find love?*

The daughter of an earl, Lady Phoebe Malcolm Duncan has the ability to talk to animals. She longs to be a veterinarian, but education requires more coin than she possesses. When the walls of her home come tumbling down, she has to take two steps back—to servitude.

Inventor Andrew Blair keeps his nose to the grindstone, knowing his friends and family depend on his talent for turning machines into money. He is about to embark on his biggest investment yet—rebuilding crumbling tenements in Old Town Edinburgh—until his beleaguered cousin begs him to hide his precocious children from a killer.

When the School of Malcolms sends Lady Phoebe as governess for his wards, Drew's well-ordered beliefs are upended. Ladies don't live in slum housing like the one he's about to tear down, nor do they command ravens or encourage children to talk to dead mothers. It might take a vengeful ghost to show the disparate pair how to join forces, fight their fears and their enemies, and reveal a

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*She's the mistress of illusion; How can he trust her lessons on love?*

Lady Olivia Malcolm Hargreaves is a viscountess, a widow, a governess, the adopted mother of a disabled toddler—but above all else, she is a survivor. When the father of the young children she's been caring for arrives on Christmas Eve, drunk and ranting, his aura and her own sad experience tell her he's dangerous.

Heart hardened after the murder of his beloved wife, Simon Blair is an industrialist who has no use for another psychic Malcolm. His late wife's weird family is more than enough interference. But his twin daughters are talking to their mother's ghost, his son and heir is floating objects that shouldn't float, and he's beleaguered by aristocrats who refuse to acknowledge his plebeian existence.

When Simon learns that Lady Olivia is in a position to help him obtain the land he needs for his business, and she recognizes that by helping him, she might regain the home she's lost, they must fight their respective prejudices and forge an uneasy alliance. It might take a ghost, an army of children, and a criminal gang to force them to recognize that they want far more than real estate.

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### *An Illusion of Love*

Book 3 of School of Magic



*Victorian Edinburgh belongs to staid professors, not the daughter of a Hindu princess.*

Apparently lacking the psychic ability of her Malcolm father's gifted British family, Azmin Dougall feels like a pigeon in a family of peacocks. Returning to her ancestral home of India, she finds solace in photography—until her film mysteriously reveals that a woman is being abused by her powerful husband. Helping the wife escape, Azmin flees for the safety of Scotland.

Dr. Zane Dare is done with risk. Because his work introduced disease to his family home, his sister is dead and his niece suffers from the results of the same infection. Louisa has been left in his care, but the bachelor physician has no time to educate an adolescent while he researches a cure. In desperation, he asks the School of Malcolms to provide a governess. The school sends Azmin—the defiant sprite who enchanted him a decade ago.

That long-ago summer crushed both their dreams, leaving them unwilling to open their hearts again. Zane's position at the university is already precarious—introducing a rebellious Hindu princess to his household will only jeopardize his research. Azmin cannot trust a man who scoffs at the psychic abilities she's just discovered, except his frail niece wins her love.

But when Azmin's photography reveals an abusive man may be courting Louisa, Zane and Azmin must set aside their differences to protect the girl who could teach their hearts to love again . . .

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*Can a timid librarian and a bold engineer save a castle's toppling tower of books?*

The stereotypical reserved librarian, Lydia Wystan has only one true love, the books that whisper to her. But unless she can *understand* the whispers, she cannot become what she wants to be more than anything—the Malcolm Librarian.

Maxwell Ives has a disastrous gift for attracting women, a trait that has resulted in three sons and a desire for solitude. Returning to England to find a school for one of his boys, Max seeks privacy in the isolated Malcolm library. But to Max's dismay, the old librarian dies, leaving Miss Wystan, a *female*, in charge. Before he can run far, far away, he learns the library tower is in danger of toppling, and his cousin is stealing from his mother's School of Malcolms.

To save the library and Max's family funds, Lydia must claim to be what she is not—a real librarian. Fascinated that his magnetism doesn't affect the one woman who can help him, Max must choose between his freedom and his family. In the process of helping

others, Max and Lydia just might learn that sometimes, love is the secret that makes magic happen.

Buy *The Librarian's Spell*

### ***Entrancing the Earl***

Book 5 of School of Magic

Release Date May 18, 2021



*Can an impoverished earl find treasure with the aid of a runaway bride and a ghost?*

Refusing to fill her drunken stepfather's coffers by marrying a wealthy American, Lady Iona Malcolm Ross flees her Highland estate for Wystan castle, a home for stray Malcolm females. She's quite content to tend her precious queen bee and hives there—until the day the castle's owner returns.

Unless Gerard, Earl of Ives and Wystan, can squeeze more income out of his estate, he'll have to close the family's deteriorating castle and evict the tenants. The sharp-tongued beekeeper who nearly kills him with her bees is simply another good reason. But lately, an artifact in his pocket weirdly whispers of treasure at Wystan, in the knowledgeable voice of a Roman soldier.

A busy man with interests in law and archeology, Gerard isn't



much inclined to believe that he's one of his family's psychic eccentrics. Until news of a ten-thousand pound reward for the return of Lady Iona, a runaway bride, introduces a whole new perspective to the word *treasure*.

Even if he weren't allergic to Iona's bees, he needs to marry money, and she is penniless. But surely, between them, they can claim the reward and still turn her wicked stepfather's plot on its head—without endangering their lives or hearts.

Buy [Entrancing the Earl](#)

## The Magical Malcolms

READ THE ORIGINAL SERIES ABOUT THE MAGICAL MALCOLMS  
AND THE SCIENTIFIC IVES--Merely Magic is scheduled for re-  
release on Aug 10, 2021

**“Patricia Rice employs wicked wit and sizzling sensuality to  
turn the battle of the sexes into a magical romp.” -Mary Jo  
Putney, NYT Bestselling author**

### **Merely Magic Magical Malcolms Book #1**



*Can a cynical scientist and an illogical enchantress find happiness?*

Lady Ninian Malcolm Siddons, a healer and herbalist, has dedicated her life to the welfare of her ancestral Northumberland village. Both her class and calling have isolated her from companionship and love. But according to legend, her beloved village cannot thrive without a magical Malcolm in residence.

Drogo Ives, Earl of Ives and Wytan, cares only for honor, science, and reason--unlike his unruly brothers and the illogical and untrustworthy female of the species. Love and marriage are two unknowns he has no desire to explore. His married brother

can inherit.

But fate and Drogo's meddling stepsister bring Drogo and Ninian together for one night...with shattering consequences. Having dealt with the inconvenient result of his father's bastards, Drogo has vowed to marry any woman who carries his child—and now the irresistible Ninian does. Only, the last time a Malcolm married an Ives, disaster destroyed Wystan and both their families. With all the odds against them, can they find a place where science and mystery meet, and build a bridge into a future where love saves both their families and their homes?

***Buy Merely Magic***

Unexpected Magic Series

***Magic in the Stars***

Unexpected Magic, Book 1

*He's a scientist who studies the stars. She's an astrologer who predicts the future. Can a lonely witch save a handsome unbeliever from his own doom?*

As an astrologer, Lady Azenor Dougall sadly realizes her stars are a danger to her beloved siblings and has banished herself from her Scots home. As the Malcolm family librarian, she dutifully creates zodiac charts for her often eccentric and mysterious relations—until the day she realizes a dire conjunction of planets spells a fatal threat in a distant branch of the family.

Buy ***Magic in the Stars***

***Whisper of Magic***

Unexpected Magic, Book 2

The death of Celeste Rochester's father on the voyage from Jamaica to London leaves her and her young siblings nearly penniless in a foreign country. Forced to battle lawyers for her inheritance and the roof over their heads, Celeste's only weapon is her mysteriously compelling voice.

“With unconventional recurring characters, passion and a bit of

danger, this is a compelling read from a master of whimsy, mayhem and laughter. The second Unexpected Magic book is a magical tale of love.” –Joan Hammond, *RT Book Reviews*

Buy *Whisper of Magic*

### ***Theory of Magic***

Unexpected Magic, Book 3

*A blind marquess who detects lies...*

*A spinster who hides behind deceit...*

*Can even magic bring them together?*

Scorned by suitors for her statuesque size, Harriet Stansbury bolts when her abusive stepfather begins negotiating with impecunious aristocrats to sell her for her dowry. When opportunity offers, she daringly takes a position in an eccentric household until she can claim her fortune.

*Romantic Times Review* 4 1/2 star Top Pick: "Known for her masterful talent for writing whimsy, humor and mayhem, Rice gives the reader a delightful romantic adventure in the third book of her Unexpected Magic series. Along with her recurring characters, she pairs a statuesque Malcolm female who is the perfect foil for the blind, arrogant, frustrated Ives male. She includes sensuality, an abduction, political skullduggery along with lively verbal bantering in this mystical, magical tale of love"-- Joan Hammond

Buy *Theory of Magic*

***Aura of Magic***  
Unexpected Magic, Book 4

Bridey and Pascoe face ghosts, assassins, and riots—but nothing as perilous as the irresistible attraction between them. With hard-fought goals at risk, they must make the ultimate choice between achieving dreams—or losing each other.

“Known for her masterful talent for writing whimsy, humor and mayhem, Rice gives the reader a delightful romantic adventure in . . . her Unexpected Magic series”—Joan Hammond, *RT Reviews* 4 ½ stars

Buy ***Aura of Magic***

***Chemistry of Magic***  
Unexpected Magic, Book 5

Diagnosed with consumption, Viscount "Devil" Dare is dying. To secure the future of his sisters, industrialist Dare agrees to a marriage of convenience with botanist Emilia McDowell in order for her to inherit her grandfather's estate. Except Dare's desire for an heir is terribly inconvenient for Emilia--her healing gift could kill her if she touches her new husband.

Buy ***Chemistry of Magic***

***No Perfect Magic***  
Unexpected Magic, Book 6

Will Ives, the bastard of the late marquess, is as strong, handsome, and smart as his titled brothers, but he has no interest in society or book learning. His unique gift for training highly-prized rescue dogs is all he needs. His peace is shattered the day the beautiful but eccentric Lady Aurelia demands his help in finding a child no one knows is missing.

Buy ***No Perfect Magic***

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And be sure to check out my mystery series **Tales of Love and Mystery** as well as my **Crystal Magic** series.



**Captivating the Countess**  
**Patricia Rice**

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## About the Author

With several million books in print and New York Times and USA Today's bestseller lists under her belt, former CPA Patricia Rice is one of romance's hottest authors. Her emotionally-charged contemporary and historical romances have won numerous awards, including the RT Book Reviews Reviewers Choice and Career Achievement Awards. Her books have been honored as Romance Writers of America RITA® finalists in the historical, regency and contemporary categories.

A firm believer in happily-ever-after, Patricia Rice is married to her high school sweetheart and has two children. A native of Kentucky and New York, a past resident of North Carolina and Missouri, she currently resides in Southern California, and now does accounting only for herself.

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Also by Patricia Rice

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BOYFRIEND FROM HELL

DAMN HIM TO HELL

GIVING HIM HELL

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